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# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order  
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



April 2010  
***The Tantra Way – I***  
Vol. 115, No. 4

# THE ROAD TO WISDOM

## SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ON *The Tantras*



**T**HE Puranas, the modern representations of the ancient Narasamsi (anecdote portion of the Vedas), supply the mythology, and the Tantras, the modern representations of the Brahmanas (ritual and explanatory portion of the Vedas), supply the ritual. Thus the three Prasthanas, as authorities, are common to all the sects; but as to the Puranas and Tantras, each sect has its own.

The Tantras, ... represent the Vedic rituals in a modified form; and before any one jumps into the most absurd conclusions about them, I will advise him to read the Tantras in conjunction with the Brahmanas, especially the Adhvaryu portion. And most of the Mantras, used in the Tantras, will be found taken verbatim from their Brahmanas. As to their influence, apart from the Shrauta and Smarta rituals, all the forms of the rituals in vogue from the Himalayas to the Comorin have been taken from the Tantras, and they direct the worship of the Shakta, or Shaiva, or Vaishnava, and all the others alike.

In what scriptures do you find statements that women are not competent for knowledge and devotion? In the period of degradation, when the priests made other castes incompetent for the study of the Vedas, they deprived the women also of all their rights.

Otherwise you will find that in the Vedic or Upanishad ge Maitreyi, Gargi, and other ladies of revered memory have taken the places of Rishis through their skill in discussing about Brahman. In an assembly of a thousand Brahmanas who were all erudite in the Vedas, Gargi boldly challenged Yajnavalkya in a discussion about Brahman. Since such ideal women were entitled to spiritual knowledge, why shall not the women have the same privilege now? What has happened once can certainly happen again. History repeats itself. All nations have attained greatness by paying proper respect to women. That country and that nation which do not respect women have never become great, nor will ever be in future. The principal reason why your race has so much degenerated is that you have no respect for these living images of Shakti. ... There is no hope of rise for that family or country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness. ... The purport of the Tantras is to worship women in a spirit of Divinity. ... Without propitiating the Mother by worship and obeisance, not even Brahma and Vishnu have the power to elude Her grasp and attain to freedom.

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From *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*,  
4.335, 7.214.



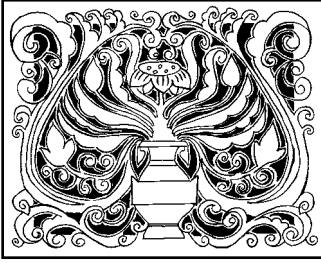
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**Vol. 115, No. 4**  
**April 2010**

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Amrita Kalasha

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# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

## Elements of Tantra

April 2010  
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तनोति विपुलानर्थान् तत्त्वमन्त्रसमन्वितान् ।  
त्राणं च कुरुते यस्मात् तन्त्रमित्यभिधीयते ॥

It is productive of extensive results, being constituted of metaphysics as well as mantras, and as it leads to liberation it is called 'tantra'.

यो निन्दास्तुतिशीतोष्णसुखदुःखादिसम्भवे ।  
समः सर्वत्र योगीशो हर्षामर्षविवर्जितः ।  
तत्त्वत्रयश्रीचरणमूलमन्त्रार्थतत्त्ववित् ।  
देवतागुरुभक्तश्च शाम्भवीमुद्रयान्वितः ।  
स तु पूर्णाभिषिक्तः स्यात् कौलिको न तु दीक्षया ॥

The king of yogis, who under all circumstances is free from joy and sorrow, and is equanimous in the face of censure, praise, cold, heat, happiness, and sorrow; who is knower of the three (tantric) *tattwas* (*atma-tattwa*, *vidya-tattwa*, and *shiva-tattwa*), as well as the significance of the guru's feet and the meaning of the mantra; who is devoted to the deity and the guru and is given to the Shambhavi gesture—he, and not one who has merely had initiation, is a Kaulika fully consecrated to the tantric path.

ध्यानं पूजा जपो होम इति हस्तचतुष्टयम् ।  
शरीरं न्यासजालं तु आत्मा तज्ज्ञानमेव च ।  
भक्तिः शिरोऽत्र हृच्छब्दा कौशलं नेत्रमीरितम् ।  
एवं यज्ञशरीरं तु मत्वा साधकसत्तमः ।  
यज्ञं समापयेन्नित्यं साङ्गमेव खलु प्रिये ।  
अङ्गहीने महान् दोषस्ततोऽङ्गं नावधीर्येत् ॥

Meditation, worship, repetition of mantra, and *homa* (fire offerings) are the four limbs of *yajna*; the web of *nyasa* (the process of placing mantras on different body parts for purification and energization) its body, and knowledge of the ritual its soul; *bhakti* its head, faith its heart, and skill in performance is termed its eyes; knowing thus the body of *yajna* one must perform *yajna* daily, complete with these parts; loss of any part is a great wrong, so no part is to be rejected. (*Gandharva Tantra*, 24.27–9)



# THIS MONTH

Being the bedrock of contemporary Hindu thought and spiritual practice, the tantras deserve close attention. This is being done, in small measure, in this and a subsequent number. We begin with a look at **Tantric Sadhana**.



The tantras are a richly diverse set of texts, tenets, and traditions that can bewilder newcomers. In **The Tantras: An Overview** Swami Samarpanananda, a monastic member of Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University, Belur, provides a summary of the origin of tantric texts and sects as well as some key tantric doctrines and practices.

Mother Kali is an iconic tantric deity who remains ill-understood even today. In **The Sacred Concept of Divine Mother Kali** Prof. Arun Kumar Biswas reflects on Divine Mother's pre-Vedic origins; her symbolism of struggle, sacrifice, and renunciation; and the syncretic concept she embodies. The author, former Professor, Department of Metallurgy, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, and Emeritus Fellow, Asiatic Society, Kolkata, is a reputed researcher on socio-cultural issues.

The tantras are at the focus of much scholarly attention in the West. But this does not always result in valid insights; distorted writings are as common as authentic reviews. Dr M Sivaramkrishna, former Head, Department of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad, takes a critical look at some of these texts and the issues they highlight in **Tantra Today: Blind Spots and Balanced Studies**.



Elizabeth Usha Harding of Kali Mandir, Laguna Beach, California, brings her rich personal ex-

periences with the Baul tradition to bear upon a fascinating account of **The Bauls** and their relation to Sri Ramakrishna.

Dr Sanjib K Borkakoti concludes his description of the **Vaishnava Literary Tradition of Assam** with a brief review of the life and works of Madhavadeva and other disciples of Shankaradeva as well as some recent Assamese scholars. The author is a writer of repute from Nagaon.



Dr Prema Nandakumar, Researcher and Literary Critic, Srirangam, writes about the efforts of Ganapati Muni in tracing the Vedic origins of epic characters and his contributions to Sanskrit as a living language in the concluding part of **The Tapasvin as a Poet: Kavyakantha Vasishtha Ganapati Muni**.

Swami Bhaskareswarananda, former President, Ramakrishna Math, Nagpur, discusses the qualifications of a Vedantin in the second instalment of **Vedanta-sara**.

Swami Chetanananda, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis, brings us a fresh portrait of **Mahendranath Gupta: A Guide to Dakshin-eswar and Kashipur**.

# Tantric Sadhana

*Saccidānanda-vibhavāt sakalāt parameśvarāt;  
Āścī-chaktis-tato nādo  
nādād-bindu-samudbhavaḥ.  
Kriyā-śakti-pradhānāyāḥ  
śabda-śabdārtha-kāraṇam;  
Prakṛter-bindurūpinyāḥ  
śabda-brahmābhvat-param.  
So'ntarātmā tadā devo nādātmā nadate svayam.*

From the immanent Parameshvara, Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute, possessed of Shakti, issued *nāda*, the creative vibration—the primordial sound—from which *bindu* was born.

From Prakṛti, characterized by the primacy of activity manifest as *bindu*, arose the supreme *śabda brahman*. Of the nature of cosmic vibration, it resides (in beings) as the indwelling spirit—manifesting as uncreated sound.

‘IT IS THE INVALUABLE DISCOVERY of the Tantras and their priceless gift to the world,’ noted Nalinikanta Brahma in his classic *Philosophy of Hindu Sadhana*, ‘that vibration (*Nāda*) and illumination (*jñāna*) are two parallel manifestations of the same Cosmic Energy or *Śakti* and that, as such, the one can lead to and awaken the other without fail. The vibrations can be easily got hold of in the form of breath (*prāṇa*) and sound (*dhvani*), and the *Cit* [Consciousness] can be realised through them, which, by itself, eludes the grasp of even the most discriminative and intelligent amongst men.’

This particular tantric insight is rooted in the knowledge of the nature and origin of the universe: ‘The Hindu Ṛṣis discovered the Great Energy (Virāṭ Śakti) which is the source of Creation, and *Nāda*, *Prāṇa*, *Śabda*, etc. are only synonyms for that Cosmic Energy. This *Śabda* or *Nāda* as Cosmic Energy is the soul of this universe and, as illumination, is also conscious. The gross form of

this *Nāda* supports the things of the universe as their soul, and its subtle form, again, is represented by the Absolute goddess (Parameśvarī) as *Cinmayī Kalā*. The Hindus attempted to realise the subtle form through the gross one, and to reach illumination by generating the corresponding vibration. The recitation of the mantras, the breathing exercises, the repetition of the name of God—all aim at awakening illumination through vibration.’

Tantra, it has been pointed out, is the soul of Hindu spiritual practices. Its wide acceptance—consciously or unconsciously—is the result of its eclectic and pragmatic nature. The tantras contain within them ‘the essentials of the Vedic sacrifices and oblations, and the essence of the monotheistic philosophy of the Upaniṣads, of the Bhakti cult preached by the Purāṇas, of the Yoga method propounded by Patañjali, and of the mantra element of the Atharva-Veda. ... The Tāntric mode of Sādhana, which combines in it Yoga and Bhakti, *mantra* and *homa* (oblation), *jñāna* and *karma*, prove beyond doubt that Tāntrism can be best studied as the synthesis of all that was good in the various forms of Sādhana in vogue and, as such, its claim to be the shortest route to the *summum bonum*, and its promise to its adherents of the easy and speedy attainment of the end, are perhaps justified.’

The most remarkable contribution of tantra probably lies in its theory and practice of mantras: ‘The *mantra* is not a mere word or symbol of expression, but is a concentrated thought of great power revealed to the Ṛṣi or the adept Sādhaka in the hour of his profound illumination.’ Mantras, tantrics realized, are the very embodiment of the *devatas* they represent—an insight analogous to the perennial relationship of the word and its referent, as noted first by the Mimamsakas—and

when 'awakened' through sadhana lead successively to *suddhi*, purification, *shiti*, illumination, and *arpaṇa*, unification with the deity.

One reason for the wide acceptability of the tantras lies in their recommendation of 'the joining of *kriyā* with *bhāvanā*, the supplementing of the intellectual process by physical and physiological exercises'. 'Tantrism generally is ritually oriented,' observes David Kinsley. 'By means of various rituals (exterior and interior, bodily and mental) the *sādhaka* (practitioner) seeks to gain *mokṣa* (release, salvation). A consistent theme in this endeavour is the uniting of opposites (male-female, macrocosm-microcosm, sacred-profane, *Śiva-Śakti*). In Tantrism, there is an elaborate, subtle geography of the body that must be learned controlled, and ultimately resolved in unity. By means of the body, both the physical and subtle bodies, the *sādhaka* may manipulate levels of reality and harness the dynamics of those levels to the attainment of his goal. The *sādhaka*, with the help of a guru, undertakes to gain his goal by conquest—by using his own body and knowledge of that body to bring the fractured world of name and form, the polarized world of male and female, sacred and profane, to wholeness and unity.'


Another apparent reason for the popularity of tantra is its promise of 'not merely liberation (*mukti*) but also enjoyment (*bhukti*), not merely final beatitude (*niḥsreyasa*) but also progress (*abhyudaya*)'. Unfortunately, *bhukti* has been taken by some to mean 'licence'. This view is strengthened by tantric esoterism, of which the *pañca-mākāra*—involving wine, meat, fish, fries, and ritual sexual intercourse—has achieved particular notoriety. This ritual, however, is prescribed only for a very select group of adepts who have been certified by their gurus as capable of placing themselves under tempting circumstances while simultaneously maintaining recollectedness of the Divine. Only this makes the apparently anti-nomian ritual a spiritual act. The *Kularnava Tantra* notes: 'If *siddhi* were to be obtained by drinking wine, then all wicked drunkards would attain it; if meat-eating alone could lead to religious merit then all meat-eaters in the world would be partaking of

merit; if sexual intercourse, O Great Goddess, could result in mokṣa, then all beings would be liberated by virtue of this act!'

The power of transgressive acts, carried out under proper guidance, can hardly be gainsaid. Surendranath Mitra, one of Sri Ramakrishna's disciples, was addicted to drinking. Sri Ramakrishna's advice to him could be taken as typical of a tantric guru: 'Look here, Surendra! Whenever you drink wine, offer it beforehand to the Divine Mother. See that your brain doesn't become clouded and that you don't reel. The more you think of the Divine Mother, the less you will like to drink. The Mother is the giver of the bliss of divine inebriation. Realizing her, one feels a natural bliss.' Taking this advice, Surendra soon found that he could no more drink at parties or whenever he liked, and he would often get absorbed in deep meditation.

The tantric sadhana in the *vira*, heroic, mode involves maintaining one's equanimity even when confronted with objects that incite greed and lust. Through his remarkable tantric sadhana, Sri Ramakrishna showed that this can be most easily done by maintaining the attitude of a child towards the Divine Mother and, consequently, seeing her manifest in all beings and objects. Sadhakas have to confront the instinctual forces of their subconscious mind at some time or other. To harness and divert these into spiritual channels is an important aspect of all sadhana, and the tantras are especially efficacious in this regard.

Sri Ramakrishna also reminds us that it is not possible to realize God as long as one is bound by hatred, shame, and fear. Devotion to Mother Kali is a potent means to overcome these bonds, for Mother Kali represents the terrible and hideous aspects of life which she invites us to divinize. She also personifies the embrace of death, which willingly or otherwise we must all accept.

The tantras, thus, are a means to confronting the Eros and Thanatos—to use Freudian terms—that underpin our lives, and using them judiciously to attain power and transcendence. This is true tantric *bhukti* and *mukti*. 

# The Tantras: An Overview

Swami Samarpanananda

**W**HENEVER HINDUS PERFORM worship—whether in Kashmir, Kanyakumari, Kamakhya, or Kachchh—they use tantric modes without even realizing this. Except for Vedic sacrifices, which in any case should not be confused with the common worship of present times, every religious sect in India uses tantric modes of worship for its rituals and spiritual practices, both external and internal. The general body of Hindu ideas, beliefs, and practices are permeated through and through with tantra.

The word *tantra* in Sanskrit is derived from the root *tanu* that means ‘to spread’, and derivatively ‘origination’ and ‘knowledge’. Thus ‘tantra’ means ‘the scripture by which knowledge is spread’. Some scholars also think that the word may have been derived by combining the terms *tattva*, the cosmic principles of Sankhya, and *mantra*, the mystical sound formulations representing deities; this implies that tantra is the application of the principles of Sankhya, and consequently also of yoga, to attain spiritual enlightenment.

The tantras are classed into several sectarian groups: Shaiva, Shakta, Vaishnava, and Ganapatya. We thus have the Shaiva Agamas, Shakta tantras, and the Vaishnava Pancharatra Samhita. On a practical basis, the expression ‘tantra’ is used generically for all the works of this class.

The tantras admit the validity of Vedic rituals, of *viveka* and *vairagya*—discernment and renunciation—as prescribed in the Upanishads, the purifying disciplines of raja yoga, and the passionate love for the Divine described in the Puranas. They exhort sadhakas to exercise their will and undertake self-effort even as they practise self-surrender and supplicate for divine grace. The tantras promise their followers not only *bhoga*, enjoyment of

worldly happiness, but also *apavarga*, liberation. The system acknowledges that the kundalini power can be aroused by sincere pursuit of any spiritual discipline, and that this arousal can bring diverse benefits to all aspirants.

## Tantras, Vedas, and Smritis

Going strictly by the definition, tantra is neither Shruti nor Smriti. The followers of tantra treat it as an integral part of the Vedas, the Agama, though not many people would support this view. Historically speaking, the tantric tradition may be considered as either parallel to or intertwined with the Vedic tradition. Later tantric writers wanted to base their doctrines on the Vedas, but orthodox followers of the Vedic tradition did not accept the tantras as products of Vedic learning and stressed their anti-Vedic character instead.

The tantras essentially teach the same tenets as the Vedas; the difference lies in the method and certain subtle points of philosophy. In various tantric works one repeatedly comes across passages where the supremacy of the Vedas is accepted, with the caveat that the present age is for the tantras. Some of the salient similarities between the two systems may be mentioned here:

- The religious attitude in the tantras is fundamentally the same as that of the Vedic rituals. The Vedas are concerned with mastery over the forces of nature. In tantric sadhana also the chief concern is ascendancy over nature, both external and internal.
- Both these systems are highly ritualistic.
- Both systems have a large pantheon of gods who receive ritual offerings and respond to prayers and supplications.
- The animal sacrifice of the Vedas became an

essential ritual in the Shakta tantra.

The tantras draw heavily from the Smritis, with necessary additions and alterations. Some interesting developments in the tantras vis-à-vis the Smritis are as follows:

- The tantras accept the *varna-ashrama* dharma, but add a fifth caste called *samanya* and a fifth *varna-ashrama* called *kaula*. It also privileges two of the four ashramas: Grihastha and Sannyasa.
- With Brahmacharya and Vanaprastha downplayed, the sixteen samskaras, rites of passage prescribed in the Smritis, are reduced to ten.
- The number of purificatory rites are also drastically reduced.
- The status of women and shudras goes up considerably in the tantra world view.
- The practice of sati is expressly prohibited.
- *Prayashcittas*, penances, for various wrongs become much simpler.
- Punishment for offences committed by common people was also made lighter.

### **Origin and Growth of the Tantras**

The tantra system makes use of gross ritual energies to access the subtle spiritual realm; this is possible because of the correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm. The tantric practitioner seeks to use the divine power that flows through the universe, including his own body, to attain purposeful goals, both spiritual and material.

The main reason for the origin and growth of tantra was the failure of the Vedic system in changed times. The stipulations regarding Vedic rituals had become impractical, the ingredients used in Vedic sacrifices were too difficult to obtain, the lifestyle prescribed for practitioners became nearly impossible to follow, and the promised results of heavens after death seemed too distant. On the other hand, Upanishadic meditations were also not easy for common people to follow, and the Puranic injunctions appeared fantastically unrealistic. People needed something concrete, simple, and yet attractive to practise. The result was the birth of tantra.

The great advantage of tantra over other religious systems was in its promise of *bhoga* as well as yoga through the same sadhana. An aspirant who seeks worldly success and enjoyment had only to make the necessary *sankalpa*, resolve, as could the aspirant for mukti. This made tantra particularly attractive.

In its wider sense, tantra is not a unitary system like the Vedas or any of the Hindu philosophies. It is an accumulation of practices and ideas of the Hindus since prehistoric times. Its birth is rooted in the Vedas; its development proceeded through the Upanishads, Itihasas, Puranas, and Smritis; and its luxuriant growth has been fostered by Buddhism, various minor Hindu sects, and also foreign influences. The vitality and elasticity thus acquired made tantra enter every house and temple of India and it also made powerful inroads into every country where Indian thought went. What obtains as Hinduism in India and the West, is essentially tantra packaged to suit the need of a particular community or individual.

Tantra is believed to have been taught by Bhagavan Shiva to his divine consort Shakti. Shiva begins by expounding Vedanta, goes through the principles of Sankhya, and ends with Shaiva tantra. Historically, it is difficult to say when exactly the tantras originated, but many estimate the system to have started crystallizing by the fifth century BCE. The real rise of tantra came with the growth of Shaivism and the Pancharatra tradition, while its necessary framework was supplied by the Sankhya philosophy. Both these religious systems, as well as the Sankhya philosophy, are quite old, which means that the seeds of tantra were sown quite early in the evolution of Hindu thought. By the tenth century brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina sects of tantra had got inextricably mixed up. This gave rise to a particular mystic form which was very near to Shaktism in essence. It also gave birth to new esoteric sects.

### **Tantric Texts and Sects**

The Agamas, Yamalas, Damaras, and Buddhist works comprise some of the primary textual

sources of the tantras. Mention of teachers like Dadhichi, Lakulisha, Kacha, and others in these texts shows that this tradition is old and respected. The Agamas and related texts are theological treatises and practical manuals of tantra. They contain information on mantras and yantras as well as discussion on *jnana*, the tantric philosophy, *yoga*, psychic practices, *kriya*, ritual, and *charya*, worship. They also elaborate on metaphysics, cosmology, the concept and mode of liberation, devotion, meditation, charms and spells, temple-building, image-making, domestic observances, social rules, and public festivals among a host of other topics. There are four classes of tantra, based on geographical location: Kerala, Kashmira, Gauda, and Vilasa; but their influence is not confined to one region alone. With time these texts and traditions have spread all over India and also become inseparable from one another.

**Agama** • Primary tantric texts are normally referred to as Agama and Nigama. In the Agamas Shiva instructs Parvati, whereas in the Nigamas it is Parvati who enlightens Shiva in the art of tantra. However, 'Agama' is the term commonly used for both these group of texts. The Agamas are divided into three principal sections: Shaiva, Shakta, and Vaishnava. The Shaiva Agamas are 28 in number, though the *Sammohana Tantra* speaks of these as comprising 32 tantra texts, 325 Upatantras, 10 Samhitas, 2 Yamalas, and 3 Damaras, among others. These Agamas also form the basis of Kashmir Shaivism or the Pratyabhijna system. Later works of the Pratyabhijna system show a distinct leaning towards non-dual Advaitism. Shaiva Siddhanta, the southern Shaiva school, and Kashmir Shaivism, regard these Agamas as their authority, besides the Vedas. Each Agama has several subsidiary Upa-agamas, of which only fragmentary texts are presently available. Bhagavan Shiva is the central deity in the Shaiva Agamas.

The Shakta Agamas glorify Shakti as the Cosmic Mother. They dwell on Shakti, the energy aspect of God, and prescribe numerous courses of ritualistic worship of the Divine Mother in various

forms. In some respects these are very much like the Puranas. A detailed list of Shakta Agamas is not easily available.

The Vaishnava Agamas are of four types: Vaikhana-sa, Pancharatra, Pratishthasara, and Vijnana-lalita. According to the *Sammohana Tantra*, this group includes 75 tantra texts, 205 Upatantras, 8 Samhitas, 1 Yamala, and 2 Damaras.

Other tantras include Saura, Ganapatya, and Bauddha tantras. *Mahanirvana*, *Kularnava*, *Kulasara*, *Prapanchasara*, *Tantraraja*, *Rudra-Yamala*, *Brahma-Yamala*, *Vishnu-Yamala*, and *Todala Tantra* are some of the important extant tantric works. Among the extant Agamas the most famous are *Ishvara Samhita*, *Ahimbudhnya Samhita*, *Sanatkumara Samhita*, *Narada Pancharatra*, and *Spanda Pradipika*.

**Yamala** • This class of literature has eight texts attributed to realized souls, called Bhairavas. The most famous work of this group is *Brahma Yamala*. The Yamalas introduce a great variety of gods and goddesses, harmonize numerous local deities and cults, present a well-developed mode of worship, and make provision for sadhana by people of all castes. These works preserve the orthodox tradition of the earlier period even as they introduce many heterodox concepts.

**Damara** • These texts, attributed to Shiva's attendants, are six in number and include *Yoga Damara* and *Shiva Damara*.

**Buddhist Tantras** • These are a later group of literature which developed around the seventh century. Tantric Buddhist mysticism assumed three different forms: Vajrayana, Sahajayana, and Kalachakrayana. The philosophical basis for these works was supplied by the Yogachara and the Madhyamika systems of philosophy. Vajrayana emphasises the importance of mantra, *mudra*, and mandala; Sahajayana discards all formalism; and Kalachakrayana attaches importance to specifics of time—*muhurta*, *tithi*, *nakshatra*, and the like—bringing thus the elements of astrology and astronomy into sadhana.

Several tantric sects became prominent over the last few centuries. These include the Kaula tradition

started by Matsyendranath, in which the practices of Buddhist Sahajayana find a lot of importance. The Natha tradition originated from the teachings of Siddhacharyas and was continued by great teachers like Gorakshanath. The Vaishnava Sahjiya cult was established in Bengal before Chaitanyadeva. In this sect Radha is the Shakti, and Krishna the supreme Reality. The Avadhuta tradition has its roots in the Natha sect, whereas the Bauls of Bengal are inspired by the Vaishnava Sahajiyas.

### **Tantric Paths: Animal, Heroic, and Divine**

The tantra tradition gives a list of seven *acharas*, disciplinary paths, meant for different practitioners: Vedachara, Vaishnavachara, Shaivachara, Dakshinachara, Vamachara, Siddhantachara, and Kaulachara. The first three are meant for practitioners with *pashubhava*, animal tendencies; Vamachara and Siddhantachara for those of *virabhava*, heroic temperament; Dakshinachara for *pashubhava* sadhakas striving to reach the *virabhava* plane; and Kaulachara is for aspirants in *divyabhava*, divine mood.

Vedachara involves adherence to the traditional injunctions of *varna* and *ashrama*; Vaishnavachara, Puranic practices; and Shaivachara, disciplines prescribed by the various *Smritis*. Dakshinachara and Vamachara are generally identified as tantra proper. The general ignorance about the true nature of tantric practice and abuse by irresponsible practitioners of Vamachara, the 'left-hand' path, made the whole science of tantra suspect. The rituals of this path are based on the principle of the 'return current', which seeks to reverse the process that creates bonds for the animal being. An important aspect of Vamachara is the use of *pancha-tattva* or *pancha makara*, the five Ms: *mamsa*, flesh, *matsya*, fish, *madya*, wine, *mudra*, fries, and *maithuna*, copulation. These terms, however, have different connotations for different classes of aspirants. Vamachara emphasizes that a person makes progress in spiritual life not by falsely shunning that which makes one fall, but by seizing upon it and sublimating it so as to make it a means of liberation.

The actual drinking of wine and ritual sexual

union are prescribed only for the *vira* aspirants. The teachers of such practitioners carefully point out that the joy and stimulation arising from these are to be utilized for the uplift of the mind from the physical plane. Genuine tantra never countenances excess or irregularity for the purpose of gratification of carnal desire. To break chastity, it says, is to lose or shorten life. Woman, associated with the tantric practices in order to help man in his path of renunciation, is an object of veneration to all schools of tantra. She is regarded as the embodiment of Shakti, the power that projects and pervades the universe. To insult a woman is a grievous sin. The same is true of meat-eating and drinking wine; the tantras specifically prohibit people from indulging in these things excepting when they have been ritually consecrated.

The *Mahanirvana Tantra* explains the five Ms as being representative of the five great elements of nature. Thus wine represents fire; fish, water; meat, air; fries, earth; and copulation, ether. By offering these to the Divine Mother one actually worships her through her creative elements.

Aspirants with animal disposition are extroverted and move along the 'outgoing current', earning merit and demerit from worldly activities. They have not yet raised themselves above the common round of convention, nor have they cut the three knots of 'hate, fear, and shame'. Swayed by passion, they are slave to emotions: lust, greed, pride, anger, delusion, and envy. Such sadhakas are not allowed even to touch the five ingredients of the left-hand ritual.

Aspirants competent for the hazardous ritual using the five Ms are called *vira*. They have the inner strength to 'play with fire' and to burn their worldly bonds with it. Established in complete self-control, they do not forget themselves even in the most trying and tempting circumstances. They have a fearless disposition, inspiring terror in those who cherish animal propensities. Pure in motive, gentle in speech, strong in body, resourceful, courageous, intelligent, adventurous, and humble, they cherish only what is good.

The sadhakas of *divya* disposition are those who have risen above all the bonds of desire and



have nothing to sublimate. *Mahanirvana Tantra* describes such aspirants as sparing in speech, beloved of all, introspective, steady, sagacious, and solicitous about others' welfare. They remain in perpetual ecstasy. For the five Ms used by the hero they substitutes *chit*, consciousness, *ananda*, bliss, and *bhava*, exaltation.

### Essential Tantric Philosophy

Reality, according to tantra, is Satchidananda—Existence, Knowledge, Bliss. Satchidananda becomes restricted through maya, and its transcendental nature is then expressed in terms of forms and categories, as explained in the Sankhya and other systems of Hindu philosophy. According to Vedanta, maya functions only on the relative plane at the time of creation, preservation, and destruction. Neither is Creation ultimately real nor are the created beings real. True knowledge reveals only an undifferentiated Consciousness. According to tantra, however, Satchidananda is Shiva-Shakti: Shiva, the Absolute, and Shakti, the creative Power, being eternally united like word and its meaning—one cannot be thought of without the other. Tantra holds that a conception of pure Consciousness that denies Shakti is only half the truth. Satchidananda is essentially endowed with the power of self-evolution and self-involution. Therefore, perfect spiritual knowledge is the knowledge of the whole—of Consciousness as *Being* and of Consciousness as the *power of becoming*.

In the tantric tradition it is only in the relative world that Shiva and Shakti are thought of as separate entities. Tantra also affirms that both *srishti*, the creative process, and the jiva are real and not merely illusory superimpositions upon Brahman. In declaring that the jiva finally becomes one with Reality, tantra differs from Vishishtadvaita.

According to tantra, the non-dual Reality undergoes evolution, which is real and not merely apparent as in Vedanta. This process involves the manifestation of certain powers as also of restrictions. This accounts for the various forms of existence and the actions and reactions that we see in the manifest world. These determinants are the *pasha*,

fetters, which weave the whole fabric of the jiva's phenomenal life. Bound by them, the jiva behaves like a *pashu*, animal. It is the avowed goal of tantra to teach the method by which these *pashas* can be cut asunder to make every jiva one with Shiva.

### Some Aspects of Tantric Sadhana

Tantric sadhana is the method of transformation of one's baser nature into the spiritual. In Vedantic sadhana one has to negate all limiting adjuncts of the Self, taking them as unreal, until one realizes Brahman. In order to reach the affirmation of oneness, one has to renounce the world of name and form. On the other hand, tantra prescribes the discipline of sublimation, which consists of three phases: purification, awakening and elevation of dormant energies, and realization. We shall take a brief look at some of the important concepts involved in tantric sadhana.

**Purification** · Evolution and involution go hand in hand. The power that created the world, and the bondages that are associated with it, can be turned back to take the individual away from the world and towards liberation. Tantra believes in these sayings: 'one must rise by that through which one falls', 'the very poison that kills becomes the elixir of life when used by the wise'. The only question is how to transform the cardinal impulses for *bhoga* into the spiritual experiences of yoga? If this can somehow be done, then the jiva will undoubtedly become one with Shiva, the individual will definitely become pure.

Tantra admits the presence of a perennial conflict between the flesh and the spirit. The observance of moral and social conventions, however desirable on the plane of worldly existence, does not make a person different from an animal. But when one realizes that the whole process of creation, preservation, and destruction is but the manifestation of the divine lila, sportive pleasure of Shiva-Shakti, one does not see anything carnal or gross in the universe. The special techniques of tantric discipline are meant to transform disintegrating forces into integrating ones.

Every action, whether yielding pleasure or pain, adds an additional link to the chain that binds the jiva. The hope of liberty lies in unwinding the coils of nature that has closed upon it. This is called the awakening of the kundalini by which one moves from the plane of impure principles to purer realms.

**Kundalini** · The spiritual awakening of a sadhaka is described in tantra by means of the concept of the kundalini power. Properly understood, the kundalini is not something peculiar to tantra but the very basis of spiritual experiences described in all religious traditions. Every genuine spiritual experience—such as the seeing of light, spiritual vision, or communion with a deity—is only a manifestation of the ascent of the kundalini. In common parlance, kundalini can be equated with the infinite potential energy present in every being, only a very small amount of which is needed for our daily activities. The coiled-up kundalini is the central pivot upon which the whole complex apparatus of body and mind moves and turns. Once the kundalini is aroused, large amounts of this potential energy turns dynamic—much like the energy released in nuclear fission—and is available for use. For the spiritual aspirant, however, the aim of awakening the kundalini is not the acquisition of greater power for the purpose of performing miraculous feats or enjoyment of material pleasures; it is the realization of Satchidananda.

**Chakras** · The awakened kundalini ascends through the Sushumna, which is the central yogic channel along the spinal column connecting the basal centre of *muladhara*, situated at the bottom of the spine, with the *sahasrara*, centre at the crown of the head. Tantra speaks of six chakras, planes of consciousness, which the Sushumna traverses and which the yogic eye visualizes as lotuses of diverse colours with varying numbers of petals located at various levels along the Sushumna. In the ordinary worldly person the Sushumna and these chakras remain closed. The closed chakras are visualized as lotuses drooping down like buds; as the kundalini rises through the Sushumna and touches the centres, these buds turn upward as fully opened flowers and

the aspirant obtains spiritual experiences.

**Mantras** · These play an important part in tantric discipline. The word ‘mantra’ literally means ‘that which, when reflected upon, gives liberation.’ The mantra is the sound equivalent of the deity—of the nature of *chit*, Consciousness—whereas the external image is the material form of the mantra. The sound-vibration is the first manifestation of *chit* and nearest to it. It is the intermediate element between pure Consciousness and the physical world, being neither absolutely immaterial like the former nor dense like the latter.

Tantra regards vibration as a manifestation of cosmic Energy, Shakti, and teaches that it can lead to the realization of *chit*, which otherwise eludes the grasp of even an intelligent person. Thus, mantras are not mere words but forms of concentrated thought of great potency. The advanced aspirant finds that a mantra and the deity with which it is associated are identical—the deity being the illumination embodied in the mantra.

**Bija** · Literally meaning ‘seed’, the *bija* is a very important component of tantric mantras and invocations. Just like the Om of the Vedas, these *bijas* are mystic sounds with specific potency representing particular deities. Thus, *aim* is used in invoking Saraswati; *brim*, Shakti in general; and *shrim*, Lakshmi.

**Yantras** · Mystical diagrams have been used as aids to worship in every religion, including Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. In tantra, they are an essential component and are known as yantras. A yantra is a diagrammatic equivalent of the deity, just as a mantra is its sound-equivalent. It is a full representation of the power which evolves and maintains an object of worship. When the yantra is established in its real potency, the concerned deity is present in it. In tantric ritual the yantra is an object of worship, the image being its tangible representation. There is a fundamental relationship between the mantra and the yantra.

Tantra insists that mantras are efficacious, that the yantras used in worship are potent, that *devatas*, deities, are conscious entities, that supernatural



Kali Yantra



Durga Yantra



Sri Yantra

powers are attained, and that the earnest aspirant experiences the rise of the kundalini through the different chakras, realizing finally one's identity with Satchidananda.

**Tantric Ritual** · Let us take a brief look at the tantric puja ritual. Usually, a tantric ritual consists in assigning the different parts of the body to different deities, the purification of the elements of the body, *pranayama*, meditation, imparting of life to the image, and mental and physical worship. These are all calculated to transform the worshipper, the image or yantra, the accessories, and the act of worship into consciousness. Harmony on the physical and mental planes are necessary for success in worship, which is created in the gross physical elements by means of prescribed postures, *pranayama*, japa, and meditation.


In addition, *snana*, ablution, purifies the physical body; *tarpana*, libations, gives inner satisfaction; *bhuta-shuddhi*, purification of the elements, frees from taints; and *dhyana*, contemplation, enables the worshipper to feel oneness with the deity. The last part of the ritual consists of a *homa*, sacrificial offerings in fire, in which the devotee completely surrenders to the deity—merging and losing one's identity in the deity. At this stage there is no more distinction between the worshipper and the worshipped, the finite and the infinite, the individual and the Absolute.

**Siddhi** · When a sadhaka attains purity of mind through ritualistic worship as prescribed in the tantras, he becomes fit for *siddhi*, the realiza-

tion of Brahman. It is then that the aspirant finds that the meditator, the process of meditation, and the object of meditation coalesce into an indivisible unity.

### **Tantra as an Integral Shastra**

Unlike many other spiritual treatises, the tantras are a complete scripture. They discuss philosophy; the form and the function of *varna-ashrama* dharma; duties, responsibilities, and penances for the individual; and the code of conduct for daily living. A true follower of tantra need not to go to any other Dharmashastra for enlightenment.

The tantras successfully worked out the synthesis of karma, jnana, bhakti, and yoga for the benefit of practitioners in achieving ultimate union with the supreme Reality. Being a product of the spiritual cross-currents of Hinduism, it sucked into its domain everything connected with religion that was to be found anywhere in India. In turn, it churned out numerous spiritual insights that were beneficial for humankind. Despite the blemishes and abuses that it received, it continues to give solace to every practising Hindu in its ritualistic, philosophical, and mystic aspects. The concept and method of transformation it developed has a unique place in the history of world religions. It is this transformation or sublimation that helped millions of materialistic minds attain a semblance of spiritual uplift. That may well be the reason it continues to form a part, in one form or other, of all Hindu spiritual practices. 

# The Sacred Concept of Divine Mother Kali

Prof. Arun Kumar Biswas

THE HOLY CONCEPT OF GOD AS MOTHER, with its mother-child relationship—representing the mutual affection between the Creator and the created ones—is a glorious chapter in the history of religions, which has barely been recorded or even researched comprehensively, as was noted by George Sarton, the eminent historian of science.

When did the concept of God or the Creator originate in human history? Did it precede or follow the discoveries of fire and heavenly motions? The ancient religions exhibit many archaeological evidences of gods and goddesses, but the concept of God as mother was suppressed as society suffered a transition from the matriarchal to the patriarchal state.

## Pre-Vedic Mehargarh

The Indian subcontinent has probably been the only place in the world with an uninterrupted tradition of the worship of God as mother. The most ancient pre-Harappan site of Mehargarh, located at the foot of Bolan Pass in Baluchistan, Pakistan, has been excavated by the French Archaeological Mission since 1974. Carbon-14 tests suggest that the site was inhabited as early as  $11,790 \pm 120$  BCE, and that a continuous civilization flowered here in several layers from the seventh to the third millennium BCE—the Neolithic to Chalcolithic ages.<sup>1</sup> Terracotta figurines of gods and goddesses used to be produced and marketed during the pre-Harappan era.

In the Zhob Valley goddesses with specific hairstyles and double spiral-headed pins, besides terracotta bulls and rams carved from alabaster, have



been found in plenty. Other goddesses with wide open eyes and with children in their laps remind one of the modern-day Kali. Many such figurines have been found around the banks of the Indus and Saraswati rivers. Some even show the red vermilion mark on the forehead, which is widely considered a mark of motherhood. The pigments used were iron ochre or antimony sulphide, *hingula*.

This tradition is still found in Hinglaj, in the Baluchistan desert—not very far from Karachi—which is reckoned as one of the fifty-one famous Shakti Pithas, particular places where different parts of the Divine Mother's body are supposed to be enshrined. The name Hinglaj may have been derived from *hingula* or Hrim Lajja, the bashful goddess of modesty.

The Indus Valley is also famous for the seals of Pashupati—Shiva or Mahadeva, the lord of animals riding on a bull—and of *sapta-r̥ṣi*, seven seers. The ram tradition was extended to the east in the Saraswati Valley. The Bhagwanpura site on the Saraswati-Yamuna basin shows terracotta rams with wheels, which presumably carried the images of the Divine Mother Saraswati.

### The Saraswati and Vedic Traditions

Recently unearthed archaeological evidence clearly establishes that in the pre-, mature-, and post-Harappan—or Indus-Saraswati Valley—civilization there existed a wide and continuous worship of the Divine Mother across several millennia. The Rig Veda has a number of monistic statements affirming the oneness of God, such as '*Ekam sad-viprā bahudhā vadanti*'; God is one, sages speak of him in various ways.<sup>2</sup> Max Müller has defined this as henotheism, 'belief in one God without asserting that he has only one name or form'. As a matter of fact, God is not only he, but also she: 'You are woman, you are man, a boy and a girl. You are the old, walking with a stick, you are born with so many names and forms. You are the blue insect, green bird with red eyes, cloud with lightning, the seasons, the oceans, beginningless, omniscient, omnipotent; from you the entire universe was born.'<sup>3</sup>

The mystic poet of the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* claimed that he had actually witnessed that great God: '*Vedāham-etam puruṣam mahāntam*; I know this great Person' (3.8). Furthermore, as God has created all the objects and creatures of this universe out of a part of himself—or herself—and remains as a spider within its own web, any person can definitely identify himself or herself with the Creator: '*Tat-tvam-asi*', '*Aham brahmāsmi*', '*So'ham*'. Such monistic statements are uniquely made in Indian sacred literature.

Saraswati was extolled not only as the best river but also as the best nourishing mother and the best goddess: '*Ambitame naditame devitame sarasvati*'.<sup>4</sup> Vak, a great spiritual aspirant, after attaining self-realization could claim herself as a devi, goddess. Was she the first woman in human history to proclaim herself an avatara, an incarnation of the Divine Mother? Vak declares in the 'Devi Sukta': '*Aham rudrebhir-vasubhiḥ-carāmi*; I move amongst the Rudras and Vasus'; and again '*Aham rāṣṭrī saṁgamāni vasūnām ... bhūri-sthātrām bhūry-āveśayantīm*; I am the sovereign queen ... abiding in manifold places, entering into numerous (forms)' (10.125.1, 3).

The Rig Veda and subsequent Vedic literature also developed a few more themes that consider God as mother. Firstly, regarding sadhana: The child has to pray to the Divine Mother, though both are of the same genetic substance! She grants her favour only when there is a fervent prayer: '*Yamevaiṣa vṛṇute tena labhyas-tasyaiṣa ātmā vivṛṇute tanūm svām*'; It can be known through the Self alone that the aspirant prays to; this Self of that seeker reveals its true nature.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, God has two aspects: the Absolute, tranquil, neuter or masculine Brahman and the active, feminine Shakti, the Divine Mother who must be propitiated by the devotee, her child. Thirdly, God is seen in three functional aspects: as creator, Brahma-Saraswati; sustainer, Vishnu-Lakshmi; and destroyer, Shiva-Shakti. Divine Mother Kali, the subject of this article, represents one of the popular names and forms of Shakti.

### Why Destruction?

At the very outset, it must be stressed that Divine Mother Kali represents not only destruction but also creation and sustenance, since God is one and indivisible. We would point out later that Saraswati, the first goddess praised in the Rig Veda—after a brief allusion to Aditi, the mother of all gods—stood for creation as well as sustenance, and even destruction.

Why destruction at all? An ordinary human being would prefer the immortality of all created objects, naively hoping to avoid destruction, decay, or death. According to some religious traditions, if God is the creator and sustainer, only a devil can be the destroyer. The Hindu religion, however, does not admit of the existence of a devil—the so-called architect of all evils and death—as the destroyer of the universe. God is indeed the creator of all good and evil, life and death. He is the creator, the sustainer, and also the destroyer.

Destruction is the necessary obverse of creation and sustenance, since transformation is the other name of creation. Disappearance of the old form must precede the appearance of the new.

Swami Vivekananda pointed to the Vedic postulate: ‘*Nāsato sat jāyate*—Existence cannot be produced by non-existence.’<sup>6</sup> Death must precede new forms of life.

At present we hear about the one-time or ‘singular’ phenomenon of the Big Bang, which took place 13.7 billion years ago.<sup>7</sup> If true, this must be, according to the Hindu belief, part of a cycle which started earlier. According to some recently published papers, before the Big Bang explosion the universe might have undergone a catastrophic implosion that reached a point of maximum density and then reversed course. For a ‘pulsating universe’, astronomer Sandage has estimated a period of pulsation of 80 billion years.<sup>8</sup>

Besides, death and destruction are only incidental to the struggle, sacrifice, and renunciation necessary for attainment of the higher ideals of social justice, spiritual welfare, and salvation. That is why we invoke the blessings of the ‘terrible’ Divine Mother Kali. In the words of Swami Vivekananda:

The stars are blotted out,  
The clouds are covering clouds,  
It is darkness vibrant, sonant. ...  
Come, Mother, come!  
For Terror is Thy name,  
Death is in Thy breath, ...  
Who dares misery love,  
And hug the form of Death,  
Dance in Destruction’s dance,  
To him the Mother comes.<sup>9</sup>

### **Struggle, Sacrifice, and Renunciation**

Across the ages India’s spiritual pursuits have been intertwined with struggle, sacrifice, and renunciation at the altar of the Divine Mother, who in turn has always provided spiritual strength. This we can easily demonstrate by citing the Rig Vedic civil war, which restored social justice through the worship of Saraswati; or the epic wars in which Krishna and Rama—while redressing the grievances of the entire womanhood symbolized in Draupadi and Sita—sought the blessings of Saraswati and Durga; or the

Bhagavadgita and the *Devi Mahatmya* exhorting us, during the centuries between the Maurya and the Gupta eras, to fight against injustice; and then during the last few centuries, India’s resurgence in the name of Divine Mother Kali.

In the name of the Divine Mother, India learnt to struggle at three levels, which we would like to record. It had to face once and again invaders from outside, and tyrants within her society. During the Rig Vedic civil war, Saraswati and the spirit of the mighty river, provided leadership in resisting the cruel money-lenders—*panis*—and the marauding tribes who came from the West, North, and South to steal cattle and agricultural produce. Later came the Persians, Greeks, Scythians, and Huns, and then the Mother-worshippers of Takshashila and Ujjayini stood up and composed the thirteen chapters of the *Devi Mahatmya*. The *Devi Mahatmya* specifically mentions the Mauryas and the Yavanas. Alexander the Greek used to wear a helmet with buffalo-horns of the Egyptian god Ammon, and thus was branded as Mahishasura, the demon killed by Durga. Later, the followers of the Divine Mother in Vijayanagara, Rajasthan, Jessore, Maharashtra, Punjab, and the then British Bengal took up sword and other armaments to wrest back their lost freedom and honour.

The second level of struggle, not so frequently mentioned, is related to the social injustices based on gender, caste and class inequalities, repressive rituals, and professional jealousies. A specific clue to this historical phenomenon is provided in the Daksa Yajna episode described in the *Bṛihad-dharma Purana*. The great Lord Shiva was not invited to the ritual sacrifice of Daksa, who happened to be the father of Divine Mother Sati, the consort of Shiva. The insulted Sati exhibited her *daśa mahāvidyā*, ten forms, and laid down her life in her father’s premises. Later, when Shiva took her back to his abode, fifty-one parts of her dismembered mortal body fell all over India, and each place where a part of her body fell is considered a Sati Pitha, a Shakta pilgrimage centre.<sup>10</sup> One of these holy places is Kalighat, in Kolkata. Ramakrishna

used to visit this Kali temple.

Followers of the Divine Mother never forgot the aforesaid historic insult. Vedic ritualists had systematically ignored the matriarchal tradition, the low-caste members of society, the non-conformist Shaiva monastics known as Vatarashanas, the itinerant Vaidyas, medical men, who moved in the forests in search of medicines and were devotees of Shiva, also known as Vaidyanatha.<sup>11</sup> These social and historical injustices have been meticulously recorded.<sup>12</sup> The spiritual ire of the Divine Mother found full poetical expression in the thirteen chapters of the *Devi Mahatmya*, which are chapters eighty-one to ninety-three of the *Markandeya Purana* and comprise seven hundred mantras and five hundred and seventy-eight shlokas. The *Devi Mahatmya* is also known as *Chandi* and *Durga Saptashati*.

The seventh chapter of the *Devi Mahatmya* deals with the special form of Divine Mother Kali, or Kalika, who had been first mentioned in the *Mundaka Upanishad* (1.2.4) as one of the seven 'tongues' or flames of Agni, fire god. In the *Devi Mahatmya* Mahakali—the consort of Shiva or Mahakala, infinite Time—killed the demons Chanda and Munda, and thus she also came to be known as Chamunda.

We have mentioned the two kinds of 'struggle' that spiritual aspirants who are anxious to propitiate the Divine Mother had to face: one against the external invaders and the other against the internal perpetrators of social injustices. We now come to the third and most difficult struggle, which occurs at the spiritual level and demands additional sacrifice and renunciation. The sadhaka must struggle against his or her own base instincts—such as sex, ego, selfishness, animosity, fear—and constantly pray to the Divine Mother for spiritual realization and ultimate liberation. This ascent to the divine realm requires not animal sacrifice but sacrifice of one's own blood, *balincaiva nija-gātrārg-ukṣitam balim*<sup>13</sup>; a lifelong sacrifice for the welfare of the universe, *jagat hitāya*; and a child's incessant weeping prayer for spiritual salvation, *ātmano mokṣārtham*, to be obtained as a boon from the Divine Mother.

### Syncretic Concept of the Divine Mother

Indians have always kept in mind that the Divine Mother possesses all the three following attributes: She creates, sustains Creation, and also destroys it. It is not that there are three separate kinds of gods and goddesses to execute the three functions. God is indeed one. When the demon Shumbha complained that the war was unequal, that he was fighting alone, whereas Chandi was receiving support from her many associates, she demonstrated that the vision of 'many' was a mirage. She was the only one; where was the second? *Ekaivāhaṁ jagaty-atra dvitīyā kā mamāparā* (10.5). It is explained in the *Devi Bhagavata*: 'Yathā naṭo raṅga-gato nānā-rūpo bhavati asau; one God assumes different names and forms like an actor on stage.'

In the Rig Veda and subsequent Vedic literature we find Mother Saraswati shining in all the three aforesaid attributes. Saraswati was known to be the creator of the universe, the upholder of the entire intellect of the living world, *dhiyo viśvā virājati*.<sup>14</sup> She was known to be the precursor of Lakshmi or Sri, the goddess of wealth and splendour (5.42.12; 7.95.6; 7.96.2). She could also be reckoned as *vṛtraghnī*, the fighter and destroyer of the evil enemy, *ghorā*, the terrible, *pāvīravī kanyā*, virgin with a spear, and the like (6.61.7; 6.49.7; 10.65.13).

This syncretic concept of the Divine Mother was pursued in the sacred literature on Mother worship across many centuries. In the *Devi Mahatmya* we find the Divine Mother as the most beautiful, benevolent, and tranquil—*saumyā-saumyatarāṣeṣa-sa umyebhyastvatisundarī*<sup>15</sup>—but at the same time the most terrible, whenever required. Thus, the Divine Mother assumes all the characteristics at one time: the wisdom and spiritual intellect of Saraswati, the redeeming spirit of Durga, the wealth, splendour, and cornucopia of Lakshmi or Sri, and the terrible face of Kali or Gouri.

*Medhāsi devi veditākṣhila-śāstra-sārā  
durgāsi durga-bhavasāgara-naur-asanīgā;  
Śrīḥ kaiṭabhāri-hṛdayaika-kṛtādhivāsā  
gaurī tvam-eva śāsi-mauli-kṛta-pratiṣṭhā.*



O Devi, you are the intellect by which the essence of all scriptures is comprehended. You are Durga, the boat that takes men across the difficult ocean of worldly existence, devoid of attachments. You are Sri, who has invariably taken her abode in the heart of Vishnu, who had Kaitabha as his enemy. You are indeed Gauri, who has established herself with Shiva (4.11).

The devotee prays to Narayani, the mother of the universe, *mātar-jagato'khillasya* (11.3), who delivers the entire spiritual wisdom and is immanent in all women, *striyaḥ samastāḥ sakalā jagatsu* (11.6). Finally, we find the three most beautiful, renowned, and off-repeated shlokas (11.10–12) addressed to her who is *ṣṛṣṭi-sthiti-vināśānām śaktibhūte sanātani*, the power of creation, sustentation, and destruction, and who is eternal. A bit later in this section (11.21–3), Narayani is named successively as Chamunda, Lakshmi, and Saraswati. Like the Gita, the *Devi Mahatmya* also declares that the Divine Mother reincarnates on this earth from time to time, in order to destroy the evil and protect the virtuous (12.36).

### The Kali Tradition of Bengal

The Gita and the *Devi Mahatmya*, in the form they are known today, were probably compiled around the same period, a few centuries before the Christian era. While the Gita triggered the Krishna or Vaishnava movement, the Bhagavata Purana, and the spiritual resurgence in South as well as North India, the *Devi Mahatmya* led to the Shakta and tantra movements and literatures. South India preferred the Sri Kula tradition, in which the Divine Mother is worshipped as the serene Saraswati, Sarada, Tripurasundari, and Sri or Lakshmi. North India, having suffered more intensely from sociopolitical instabilities for centuries, took recourse to Kali Kula, the model of dialectics between struggle and peace in the spiritual world.

During the phases of decadent Buddhism in India, the diverse varieties of non-Vedic tantra—Buddhist, Vaishnava, and Shakta—were interconnected; consequently, the last two varieties became prominent in Bengal with the gradual disappear-

ance of Buddhism during the onslaught of Islam. The Shakta tradition was boosted by the establishment of the fifty-one Sati Pithas all over the country.

Jayadeva (fl. 12th cent.), Vidyapati (1375–1450), and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1485–1533) spread the Krishna cult in eastern India—with Mahaprabhu combining the Advaita philosophy of *tat-tvam-asi* with the Dvaita philosophy of love and devotion to the Divine.

Vidyapati described the rituals for worshipping the Divine Mother well before Chaitanya. Raghunandana (1500–75) wrote the details for performing Durga Puja in his *Tithi Tattva*, which was followed in the ceremony of the year 1580 arranged by King Kamsanarayana.

Following the *Markandeya Purana* and the *Devi Mahatmya*, the worship of the Divine Mother was described in detail in the *Devi Bhagavata*, the *Vamana Purana*, the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, and many tantra texts. *Rudra Yamala* followed the *Devi Mahatmya* in describing the precise iconic posture of Mother Kali, which is recreated even today.

Krishnananda Agamavagisha (fl. 16th/17th cent.) was a reputed Shakta. Before his time the precise iconic concept of Mother Kali had not taken any concrete shape. Krishnananda received the divine vision of a low-caste, semi-nude, young, black-complexioned girl with dishevelled long hair and tongue protruding as if in shame. Saints of Bengal such as Ramprasad Sen (1723–94) and Ramakrishna (1836–86) had similar visions.<sup>16</sup>

Bengal has been blessed with many devotee saints such as Raja Ramakrishna (d. 1795) of Natore, Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya (1772–1821) of Bardhaman, famous for his devotional lyrics; and Bama Kshyapa (1837–1911) of Tarapitha, who sung the glory of Mother Kali.

Brahmananda Giri and Atmaram Brahmachari had founded the famous temple of Kalighat in the southern part of modern Kolkata, during or before the reign of the famous Mughal emperor Akbar.<sup>17</sup> To the north of Kolkata we have the hallowed Kali temple of Dakshineswar, where Ramakrishna

Paramahansa, hailed as an incarnation, received the vision of the Divine Mother. Let us quote a unique description of that image of Kali:

The main temple at Dakshineswar is dedicated to Kālī, the Divine Mother, here worshipped as Bhavatārīni, the Saviour of the Universe. The floor of this temple also is paved with marble. The basalt image of the Mother, dressed in gorgeous gold brocade, stands on a white marble image of the prostrate body of Her Divine Consort, Śiva, the symbol of the Absolute. On the feet of the Goddess are, among other ornaments, anklets of gold. Her arms are decked with jewelled ornaments of gold. She wears necklaces of gold and pearls, a golden garland of human heads, and a girdle of human arms. She wears a golden crown, golden ear-rings, and a golden nose-ring with a pearl-drop. She has four arms. The lower left hand holds a severed human head and the upper grips a blood-stained sabre. One right hand offers boons to Her children; the other allays their fear. The majesty of Her posture can hardly be described. It combines the terror of destruction with the reassurance of motherly tenderness. For She is the Cosmic Power, the totality of the universe, a glorious harmony of the pairs of opposites. She deals out death, as She creates and preserves. She has three eyes, the third being the symbol of Divine Wisdom; they strike dismay into the wicked, yet pour out affection for Her devotees.<sup>18</sup>

Swami Nikhilananda did not provide the complete translation of the original and sweeter description in Bengali.<sup>19</sup> It may be noted that while the *Rudra Yamala* described the terrible and iconic Shmashana Kali of the cremation ground, nude and devoid of gems and golden ornaments, modern-day devotees prefer her more gentle and amiable forms—as Bhadra Kali or Dakshina Kali—accepting only her right hands and not the left ones!

(To be concluded)

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12. See, for instance, Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Science and Society in Ancient India* (Calcutta: Research India, 1977); Arun Kumar Biswas, *Sarasvati-Saradar Anudhyane* (Calcutta: Ananda, 1994), 65–8.
13. *Devi Mahatmya*, 13.12.
14. See Rig Veda, 1.3.10–12; 7.95.2; 7.96.3; 6.61.4; 6.49.7.
15. *Devi Mahatmya*, 1.81.
16. A British technician of a gramophone company in Calcutta, while recording Kali kirtans composed by Kazi Nazrul Islam and sung by Gnanendra Prasad Goswami, was blessed with this same divine vision, but the singer and the composer sitting outside the enclosed recording room missed Her! The episode was described by the musicians Santosh Sengupta and Biman Mukherjee.
17. See Nidhulal Bhattacharyya, *Kalighater Aitihasik Katha* (Calcutta, 1364 BE); Purba Sengupta, *Ekanna Pith* (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh, 1998).
18. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 9.
19. The details of the ornaments worn by Mother Kali, for example, are left out: 'On her holy feet there are *nupur*, *gujripancham*, *panjeb*, *chutki*, as well as red hibiscus and bel leaves. *Panjeb* is normally worn by women in western India. Paramahansa-deva had a special fascination for this ornament, so Mathur Babu arranged the same for the Divine Mother.' See Mahendranath Gupta (M), *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 1404 BE), 9.

# Tantra Today: Blind Spots and Balanced Studies

Dr M Sivaramkrishna

THE WORLD OF TANTRIC STUDIES and, by and large, its practitioners, exist today in an ethos where both the ethics of interpretation and practice are highly contested spaces. Proliferation of studies matches the profusion of interpretations. The meticulously scholarly jostle with sensate and sensational claims. Energies of transformation often get stuck with erotic motifs. The new age spiritual seekers show a special penchant for those ever elusive aspects: kundalini and chakras. The coiled serpent's pythonic grip strangles the nerve centres of jaded consciousness vitiated by the immensely popular notions of Freudian libido and related psychologies.

Sounds cynical? But this is neither cynical nor censoring. It is realistic. If academics exercise their alleged freedom to deconstruct tantric texts to the full, popular accounts revel in cloying narratives. Nor do global players show any sensitivity to the imbalances and distortions involved in deconstructing texts of the 'other'. Canons of interpretation are often twisted and tortured in ways that render the myth of the Procrustean bed insignificant. Infantile fixation, trauma of parental loss, the notion of 'heroic' practitioners—all supposedly rooted in childhood trauma and subsequent identity crises—crisscross many of the tantric studies. Every prophet comes in for 'psyching' in terms of theories, which are then universalized through clever marketing; in the process, the sense of the sacred is totally eclipsed.

Ironically, the authentic interpreters are often rendered helpless in this process. For instance, Georg Feuerstein, a consistently balanced explorer of both yoga and tantra traditions, says: 'The paucity of resources of research and publications on the tantric heritage of Hinduism has in recent years made room for a crop of ill-informed popular books on what I have called "Neo-Tantrism". Their reductionism is so extreme that a true initiate would barely recognize the Tantric heritage in these writings. The most common distortion is to present tantric Yoga as a mere discipline of a ritualized or sacred sex. In popular mind, 'tantra' has become equivalent to sex. Nothing could be farther from the truth!'<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, there is also the balancing phenomenon which takes a holistic and pragmatic attitude exemplified in the dynamics of his own experience: Sri Ramakrishna.



### Understanding Tantra

Sri Ramakrishna's tantra sadhana is a saga which, if it is to be properly understood, requires adequate recognition of the crucial role he assigned to 'woman and gold' as the hinterland energies that control the human psyche. With prophetic accuracy he warned that in our times these are going to be the pervasive powers shaping human behaviour everywhere, irrespective of cultural and geographic differences. The simple reason is that they are *upadhis*, forces, that few can control and fewer still channel in a positive way. Or they are explosive energies that can throttle the finest intellects. But, as is possible with all energies, they can be prevented from short-circuiting the other deeper dimensions of human aspirations. And Sri Ramakrishna showed how.

The most efficacious mode of this re-channelling is tantra. Anticipating the surprise such a statement is likely to evoke, the Great Master says to a devotee: 'Follow your own intuition. I hope there is no more doubt in your mind. Is there any? *The path of the Vedas is not meant for the Kaliyuga. The path of Tantra is efficacious.*'<sup>2</sup> Further clarifying the issue, Sri Ramakrishna asks: 'Do you mean to say that one cannot follow the path of Tantra? That which is Brahman, is also Śakti, Kālī' (ibid.). Finally, he suggests the qualifying *adhikara* for this path: 'When the heart becomes pure through the practice of spiritual discipline, when one rightly feels that God alone is the Doer, He alone has become mind, life, and intelligence' (ibid.). Without this purification, the very energies of transformation become avenues of enervation and decadence. Of course, apparent decadence has its redemptive dimensions as is dramatically demonstrated by Sri Ramakrishna's lila with Girishchandra Ghosh.

The analogy Sri Ramakrishna gives is most telling: If one can direct the love of the mother for her child, of the chaste wife for her husband, and of the miser for his money towards the Divine, the combined inherent energies trigger a tremendous manifestation of the higher reaches of consciousness. Then, such dichotomies as gender fuse into a unity: 'The Divine Mother revealed to me that the men

and women in this house were mere masks; inside them was the same Divine Power, Kundalini, that rises up through the six centres of the body' (291).

This, along with the worship of Sri Sarada Devi as Shodashi, constitutes the tantric system of enlightenment as Sri Ramakrishna experienced it. The current trend, on the other hand, is towards accelerating these energies without giving them proper orientation. Or, may we say, the Divine Mother intensified her lila by (mis-)directing the scholars of tantra towards focusing on 'woman and gold'. Of course, there are also those who sensed the mystery, but deliberately kept it to the *manomaya kosha*, the mental realm, rather than taking a deeper spiritual plunge.

The predicament of tantric studies today is perhaps shown analogically by some incidents that Sri Ramakrishna was witness to. In the house of the Lahas in Kamarpukur an *upanayana*, sacred thread, had been placed on the image of the Divine Mother. Amazed at this, a visitor asked why there was this sacred thread on the image of Kali who, after all, is a woman? This elicited an equally amazing but ironic answer from the master of the house: 'Brother, I see that you have rightly understood the Mother. But I do not yet know whether the Divine is male or female' (ibid.). Sri Ramakrishna himself had Mathur Babu see on his own frame the divine forms of Shiva and Shakti—see the truth behind the sacred thread!

This incident can be seen as the state of threshold consciousness that Sri Ramakrishna experienced and called *bhavamukha*. It can be seen as continuity between samasara and nirvana, in Buddhist terms. To Sri Ramakrishna, the world is 'a mart of joy' in the very midst of felt sorrow. Lama Anagarika Govinda says: 'This [tantra] is what we may call the warp and woof of reality, the infinite interrelationship of all that exists in the external structure of the universe, which is repeated or reflected on a smaller scale in every living organism.' This, he says, 'is the great discovery of the Tantras which made it possible to cut across all religious dogmas and formulations and thus to

represent a spiritual science independent of mere beliefs or opinions but *ever verifiable by experience*, because [it is] based on strict methodology of psychological observation and meditational practices.<sup>3</sup> This reminds us of the Great Master's mantra: Mind is everything.

Cutting across theological divides, tantra is the key to Vajrayana Buddhism. 'The word *tantra* itself', says Stephen Batchelor, 'means continuity. In contrast to the earlier schools of Buddhism, where discontinuity between the unsatisfactory state of samsara and the transcendent realm of nirvana is emphasized, the Vajrayana asserts the common ground in which both samsara and nirvana are rooted.'<sup>4</sup>

### **Distortion v. Allusion**

A recent exposition of tantra, by Wendy Doniger, is mostly a history-based narrative with a dash of myth.<sup>5</sup> Tantra draws out her usual favourite themes: dismemberment, philandering gods—'Sex and Sects'—bodily chemistry, and the like. Though the text has the veneer of scholarship, it is of little help to the initiate. Its references to translations of texts do, however, suggest to the reader an important aspect of tantra: *sandhya-bhasha*, twilight language. The celebrated scholar Mircea Eliade explored this,<sup>6</sup> and there is also a full-length study by Roderick S Bucknell and Martin Stuart-Fox.<sup>7</sup> The language of these texts carries a deliberate morphing of the intended meaning. This is, roughly, a symbolic language and, as the authors say, this 'could prove useful as landmarks by which meditators could chart their progress' (ibid.). Perhaps, Sri Ramakrishna's linguistic reversal of words like 'gita'—morphed into 't(y)agi'—to elicit their essence has traces of this twilight language which, for sure, needs further exploration.

A link to this is Abhinavagupta's theory of *dhvani*, verbal allusion. His *Tantraloka* remains a classic text in tantric studies. But his contribution also stretches into aesthetics. The recent volume on Abhinavagupta compiled and edited by Makarand Paranjape and Sunthar Visuvalingam contains important contemporary evaluations—those by

Christopher Wallis, on Shaiva theology, and Debabrata Sen Sharma, on Kashmir Shaivism vis-à-vis the concept of ignorance, being particularly important.<sup>8</sup> But the most interesting is the critique of David Gordon White's anthology of essays on tantra.<sup>9</sup> It contains 'an enormous amount of information on tantra and its infamous rituals'. But the findings come through 'a lens that warps and bends the information drastically'. Of course, this is a very common current academic trend, and unfortunately there is no collective forum in India to question it.

Tantric studies could benefit immensely in their psychoanalytic and linguistic approaches from Jacques Lacan's insight into *dhvani* as 'a return to the use of symbolic effect which can proceed as a renewed technique of interpretation', a concept that is in line with Abhinavagupta's thought.<sup>10</sup> 'We could adopt, as a reference here,' he says, 'what the Hindu tradition teaches about *dhvani*, in the sense that this tradition stresses the property of speech by which it communicates what it does not actually say' (ibid.). The apparent variance between the stated and intended meanings is both a source of *rasa*, relish, as also an attempt at coding the secrets of a text, especially a tantric one.

This may well explain Margaret and James Stutley's description of Vamachara as the 'literal level of understanding' and of Dakshinachara as 'metaphorical interpretation of its practice'.<sup>11</sup> This dichotomy, they say, is resolved by 'reason'. And it is 'a realization achieved by all the constituents of the psychosomatic organism' expressed in 'the Tantric erotic metaphor as *kundalini*, the latent energy stored at the base of the spinal column, which like a coiled serpent uncoils through the several parts (*chakras*) of the spine and finally reaches the nerve centres of the upper brain (*sahasrara*)' (299). Kundalini and chakras raise the hornet's nest of scholarship. For instance, in Geoffrey Samuel's recent and very scholarly study of the links between tantra and yoga, tantra is seen as a 'sophisticated and elevated means for the attainment of exalted spiritual goals' and yet it 'contains ... practices that seem regressive and bizarre'.<sup>12</sup>

We find quite a few references to tantra in *Religions of India in Practice*, edited by Donald Lopez, Jr—one of the Princeton University series on religions in practice. In his study of *Kaula Upanishad*—‘The Secret of the Preceptors’—Douglas Renfrew Brooks points out that it ‘collects in a single place ideas crucial to understanding Hindu tantrics which sought legitimacy within the religious and social mainstreams of priestly orthodoxy’ and introduces in that tradition some ‘new ideas’.<sup>13</sup> The emergence of the Goddess as Power marks a radical assertion of the Divine Feminine. Its expansion is obvious in the emergence of the Dashamahavidyas, ten forms of the Divine Mother. This volume has Rachel Fell McDermott’s translations of some ‘Bengali Songs of Devotion and Praise’. McDermott has also an independent volume of poems on Kali and Uma in English translation.<sup>14</sup> It signals the larger theme of religious faith and feminization of the deity. This genre seems to be quite popular, as is evident in two more collections: one by Lex Hixon, who has also written one of the earliest essays on the primacy of the tantras in understanding Sri Ramakrishna; the other is by Babaji Bob Kindler.<sup>15</sup>

Between these two translations of poems, one notices a difference: Hixon has inwardness with the tradition, while McDermott’s is weighted towards scholarship and a certain amount of academic detachment. Hixon sees the common elements knitting the goddesses of varied faiths. ‘The Divine Mother’, he says, ‘is not distinct in essence from the inscrutable Yahweh of Jewish tradition, God the Hidden Father of Christianity or Allah Most High of Islam, who is beyond all conceptions or descriptions. ... From the radiant blackness of the womb of Mother Reality emerge numerous messengers of truth, profoundly mature women and men who have graced every culture throughout history’ (ibid.).

### Origins and Applications

An overview of tantric studies is found in Douglas Renfrew Brooks’s translation of *Tripura Upanishad*

*Bhashya* as the *Secret of the Three Cities: An Introduction to Hindu Sakta Tantrism*. ‘Our studies indicate’, he says, ‘that Hindu Tantric esotericism is neither completely new nor is it merely a rehash of antiquated ideas destined, as the non-tantric views, to failure.’ To achieve authenticity, he adds, one must grapple with more assumptions: ‘There exists a transcendent reality that is of eternal and divine origin that is immanent in *this* world. For the Tantric, the transcendent can be made immediately present if one is willing to commit oneself to the risky business of change in one’s present life.’<sup>16</sup>

An equally valuable anthology of essays exploring comprehensively the basic aspects of tantric practice is *Roots of Tantra*. Edited by Katherine Anne Harper and Robert Brown, it examines the history and development, the art history and archaeology, and the textual sources of tantra. Andre Padoux, for instance, makes a point which needs greater in-depth study. The very term ‘tantra’, he says, ‘was coined by Western Indologists of the latter part of the nineteenth century whose knowledge of India was limited and who could not realize the real nature, let alone the extent, of the Tantric phenomenon’.<sup>17</sup> In short, one has to examine if its practices are really ‘coherent’.

Robert Brown makes special mention of the study of the ‘Spinal Serpent’ by Thomas McEvilley. McEvilley, says Brown, ‘points out for the first time the startling parallels between the Hindu doctrine of the Kundalini [and] Plato’s doctrine in the *Timaeus*’ (8). These correlations are so complete that McEvilley undertakes to search for connections between Greece, India, and even China. Truly, depths of the human past show surprising interconnections. Moreover, on the levels of aesthetic creativity, the tantric perception of kundalini has its own role, on which there are many views. In his deeply intuitive study *Seven Little Known Birds of the Inner Eye*, Mulk Raj Anand speaks of it as ‘the mysterious ... or dormant serpent power which may be the ultimate repository of all the rhythmic wavelengths’. By concentration, all latent powers ‘can be converted into active energy

... through the exercise of will and certain centres like the mysterious kundalini'. Moreover, pointing to the psychic centres, he says that they can integrate, in association with 'reason', 'the creative and sustaining power to unravel dreams, fantasies and nuances of awareness'.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Krishna Prem and Madhava Ashish in their masterly study entitled *Man, The Measure of all Things*, refer to kundalini as the mode of absorption of various elements constituting 'the order of things' underlying the universe. Pointing to 'the ingenious arrangement' of the five elements, they say that 'whether it can bear scrutiny or not is not our point', but this wholeness 'can be experienced, when passing into a state of intense inner contemplation', and 'that the outer senses one by one go into abeyance ... in a manner similar to the absorption (*laya*) of successive elements, one within the other, described by *Kundalini Yoga Shastra*'.<sup>19</sup> Thus, kundalini seems to be the fount of creativity assuming diverse forms.

The enigmatic Gurdjieff, says P D Ouspensky, used to speak of 'some kind of strange force which is present in man and which can be awakened. But none of the known theories give the right explanation of the force of Kundalini.' Contesting the claims made about it, he asserts that 'Kundalini is not anything desirable or useful for man's development'. The occultists, he says, 'have completely altered its meaning and from a very dangerous and terrible thing have made something to be hoped for and to be awaited as some blessing'.<sup>20</sup> It hypnotizes people into staying in their present state with the result that our objective experiences in the spiritual quest are transformed by the kundalini at once into imagination and dreams.

Comparable, but much more transparent, are the insights of Heinrich Zimmer, who links artistic forms and their yogic origins as embodied in their contemplative levels. 'There is a psychological wisdom', he observes, 'in the fundamental axiom taught by the tantras regarding the worship of the sacred image: "Only as long as *dhyana* lasts, does *puja* last." By means of consignment

of breath (*pranapratishta*), in which this principle is incorporated, the ultimate truth of the tantras is made manifest to the believer during every ritual act he performs: the truth that he is himself the Divine (*Brahman*), the One-without-a-Second'.<sup>21</sup> Here is the symbiotic trinity of tantra, mantra, and yantra, the interplay of which constitutes the dynamics of the tantric systems. They also include the aesthetics of drama, which for Sri Ramakrishna functioned as a trigger to achieve a conjoining of everything.

A recent study by Peter Marchand, in fact, is based on the yogic roots of the nine emotions in terms of 'the Tantric Principle of Rasa Sadhana'. Marchand observes: 'The approaches of Yoga, Tantra and Ayurveda offer much more practical insight and advice about how to really work with emotions'.<sup>22</sup> This aspect is brought out with greater insight by David Frawley, alias Vamadeva Shastri. He points out that 'Ayurveda and Yoga both relate to the system of Tantra'. But 'Tantra is a *complete system of human development* that can aid us in improving all aspects of our lives'. He also discusses the 'sensory therapies of colors, gems, sounds and mantras along with the use of various deities'.<sup>23</sup>

Especially illuminating in regard to 'visualization' as a technique are views found in Ralph Metzner's account of tantra, which he places alongside I Ching, tarot, alchemy, astrology, and what he calls 'actualism'. These are maps of consciousness as expounded in tantra. 'One might wonder', he says, 'at the extensive use of visualization techniques in Tantric Hinduism and Buddhism.' He distinguishes 'between ... illusory images (*māyā*) that keep him in bondage through desires and fears' and 'images of the peaceful and wrathful deities and Buddhas that he visualizes and identifies with, and that guide him in the process of meditation'.<sup>24</sup>

Prajna Shah's volume on the therapeutic aspect of tantra is a fairly helpful book. Though it needs better editing and printing, this doctoral thesis is full of thought-provoking ideas. Of special interest is the chapter on the 'Applied Side of Tantra' focusing on dance, music, astrology, and sacraments such



as yantra and mantra.<sup>25</sup> It has comments on the Sri Chakra and its visual texts. Another study of Sri Chakra which has not acquired the recognition that it deserves is by Swami Pranavananda, whose book on Kailas and Mansarovar is considered a classic. *A Treatise on Sri Chakra* is an exhaustive guide. Informative and instructive, it is full of helpful hints in many connected areas.<sup>26</sup> A more recent addition to the literature on Sri Chakra is by Pappu Venugopala Rao.<sup>27</sup> Two features of Venugopala Rao's book are especially helpful: the lucid presentation of such concepts as *mudras* and the integration of tantric motifs as found in the musical heritage of Muthuswami Dikshitar's *Navavarana Kriti*. Discussion of the geometrical features—a central item in tantra—of the Sri Chakra and the explanation of *bijaksharas* make this a comprehensive cyclopedia in this area.

### The Occult and Esoteric

The distinction between the intrinsic significance of various aspects of tantric practice could lie in the two systems of Vamachara and Dakshinachara, which are easy to straightaway subject to ethical privileging. In any case, to put various systems together into an exploratory study runs the risk of privileging at any level. This is particularly risky in analysing tantra, which is subject to academic blind spots. For, by and large, current academics work on one side of a colossal divide separating their own convictions from religious faith.

There is another category: the overly occult and esoteric writing—due apologies here to the enormous work of Colin Wilson. One outstanding example is the massive volume by Alice Bailey. Entitled *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, it is incredibly impressive in the stupendous range of analysis, the sheer quantum of which deters the reader. She sees kundalini as a refining agency: it 'causes the elimination of all matter that is coarse and unsuitable, and casts it off in exactly the same way as a rapidly rotating wheel casts off or rejects from its surface'. By this process it purifies 'etheric form and cleanses it from "dross"'. In short, this is a process

of controlling the two fires: the 'fire of matter and the fire of mind'.<sup>28</sup>

Hiroshi Motoyama provides a more accessible study on the chakras, which he sees as bridges of unitive higher consciousness. A fairly exhaustive grounding in the subject—with insights drawn from the Upanishads, the classic *Shat-chakra-nirupana*, and other texts—informs Motoyama's study. It contains an overview of hatha and dhyana yogas vis-à-vis meditative states. He considers the chakras as avenues to awaken higher consciousness—they represent 'tantra yoga'. Together they enhance functions of both mind and body and are the most effective way to develop *siddhis*! But, he adds, though 'commonly defined as "miraculous powers", *siddhis* are best understood as faculties bestowed upon the aspirant when he experiences the divine realm of existence'. Motoyama also clarifies that 'the awakening of the chakras transports one to the divine world, the world of the True Self'.<sup>29</sup>

A more interesting view is found in Andrea Judith's book on the same subject. If I have followed her ideas clearly, she makes a plea for a distinction between the system of chakras as experienced through the kundalini—rooted in Indic psychological frames—and the chakras as 'a personal growth model, freed from the presuppositions rooted in the Indic psychological frames'. In other words, she believes 'Westernisation is an important step for speaking to the Western mind in a way that is harmonious with the circumstances in which we live, rather than antithetical to it'.<sup>30</sup> Journals like the *American Vedantist*—predominantly based in Ramakrishna-Vedanta—probably signal the trend Andrea Judith suggests. Swami Vivekananda himself stressed the overall need to present Indian spiritual tradition shorn of its idiosyncratic scaffolding. Andrea Judith instances the Kabbalistic 'tree of life' and the Christian 'seven days of creation' as analogies.

A step in this direction is Charles Breaux's study of the chakras and tantric systems in terms of Jungian psychology. Though Jung's archetypes are fascinating in this context, Breaux makes a perceptive

criticism: 'Although Jung appreciated the scope and depth of consciousness in some Eastern and primitive cultures, he summed up the common Western view of consciousness as a product of perception and orientation in the external world.' Above all, 'the Western concept of consciousness implies that without the ego and the cerebrum, consciousness does not exist'.<sup>31</sup>

(To be concluded)

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# The Bauls

Elizabeth Usha Harding

A band of minstrels suddenly appears, dances, and sings, and it departs in the same sudden manner. They come and they return, but none recognizes them.

—Sri Ramakrishna

SRI RAMAKRISHNA SAID that he would be born again as a Baul; the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi told this to Swami Arupananda. According to one of her recorded conversations, this would happen within a century, while Girishchandra Ghosh and some others were of the opinion that Sri Ramakrishna spoke of returning in two hundred years.

## My First Experience with the Bauls

It was the year 1985—almost one hundred years after Sri Ramakrishna's passing—and I was living near the Hollywood Vedanta Society at the time. When I heard that one of the most famous Bauls—Sri Purnadas Baul—was on tour in Los Angeles, I went to find him. This was my chance to get to know more about the Bauls.

I had been rather ill for almost a year, suffering from a severe respiratory infection and, since I had never experienced any long-lasting illness before, I felt insecure and thought that I might never get well. When Babu, Purnadas's eldest son, invited me to come to the 1986 Joydeb Mela, I happily accepted. For a long time I had the desire to go to India, travel to a remote place and write about it for the *National Geographic* magazine. This was my chance to do that and to forget about my illness. Moreover, deep in my heart I cherished a wild dream: perhaps, I would find Sri Ramakrishna born again as a baby Baul at the mela, fair.

As it turned out, my first trip to India put me into the fast lane to God. Although I never wrote a story

for the *National Geographic*, I got cured of my illness and I started to live and experience first-hand what I only had been reading and dreaming about before.

For those unfamiliar with this event, Joydeb Mela is a three-day and three-night Baul festival which takes place every year during the time of Makar Sankranti, the fourteenth day in January as per the solar calendar when the sun begins to travel northwards. The mela is held in Kenduli, a small village in Birbhum located about 30 km west of Shantiniketan, where Rabindranath Tagore founded his famous forest university. Tens of thousands of people throng to Kenduli during the mela to hear the Bauls sing and also to bathe in the Ajoy River during the auspicious time of Makar Sankranti.

The poet Jayadeva, who composed the *Gita Govinda*, is said to have taken birth at Kenduli, although some dispute that and put his birthplace somewhere in Orissa. Be it as it may, the Joydeb Mela is dedicated to honouring Jayadeva and his wife Padmavati and, as one wanders or rather is pushed by the crowd through narrow, dusty lanes lined by make-shift stalls, one finds many pictures, statues, and small booklets glorifying the poet. One of Jayadeva's famous sayings is '*sabar upare manush satya tahar upare nai*'; there is no higher truth than the human soul.

Throughout the year Kenduli is a sleepy little village, but when the mela starts thousands of people arrive in cars, buses, bullock-carts, and on bicycles. There are long lines of dusty villagers that have walked for days to get there. Every year, temporary large tents are erected in Kenduli where the Bauls stay and perform. Generally, these tents fill up with people way past maximum safety regulations.

When I arrived in Calcutta it was night time, and Purnadas's sons Babu and Bapi picked me up

from the airport. The first impressions of India rolled past me as I pressed my nose against the car window. I saw people walking in the dark and shopkeepers sitting in small stalls lit up by flickering kerosene lanterns. This sight was deeply familiar. It reminded me of my early childhood when my mother, grandmother, and I stayed in a house in the Austrian countryside after the war.

Early next morning Purnadas, his wife Manju Das, his three sons Babu, Bapi, and Chotton, and I squeezed into a light-blue Maruti mini-van and drove to Shantiniketan, where we picked up three musicians that were to accompany Purnadas during the performance at Joydeb. It was hot, dusty, and extremely uncomfortable sitting in the crowded car. As we drove on a small country road over pothole after pothole and dodged one head-on collision with a truck after another, we were all getting somewhat irritable. All of a sudden, Manju Das began singing a Baul song. It was as if she waved a magic wand. The mood changed instantaneously from being irritable to joyous. Everybody in the car started singing, and we arrived in Kenduli elated.

I did not want to get out of the car when I saw the mass of people that surrounded us. The ocean of excited faces staring at us was scary to me. Out of exuberance over the arrival of Purnadas, people were shaking the car. The side door opened and Purnadas stepped out of the car unperturbed and smiling. I was scared to get out, and I was even more scared to be left behind. Clutching my camera equipment and purse, I pushed through the throng of people, following Purnadas's orange turban bouncing above all the heads in front of me. I was terrified of getting lost.

In later years I learned that there was never any chance of me getting lost. I may not have known where I was, but everybody among the thousands of people attending Joydeb knew exactly where I was at any time. I was one of, perhaps, two or three Westerners that attended the mela. During my first trip to India, I still thought like a Westerner. I had not yet learned the Indian way.

Kenduli did not have much of an infrastructure

to support that many people. At that time there were dirt roads and it was very dark at night because few houses and tents had electricity. Yet, the magic that happened on a stage lit by a single light bulb is difficult to describe.

They say that once you have listened to a Baul singing ecstatically, you will never forget this experience. I can vouch for that. Even though I don't understand the words being sung and need to rely on somebody's translation, my inner being intuitively responds to the call of the Baul. Filled with passionate longing for God, the Baul sings earthy songs dripping with the juice of divine love. As he sings loudly, the red earth of Bengal resounds and carries his call to villages far off into the horizon.

### ***The Ways of the Bauls***

Though most Bauls are poor, their spirit is rich due to non-attachment to external things. Outwardly they wear the garb of a beggar but, inwardly, they delight in the wealth of bliss. Established in sadhana, the Baul sings with the freedom of a soul without shackles. Baul songs are mystical, poetic, and multi-layered. Underneath the obvious meaning of words, lie deep meanings that cannot be properly understood by a person who does not practise sadhana. Secrets of Baul sadhana are given openly in hidden language.

Nabanidas Kshyepa Baul's elder brother Rasaraj wrote the following famous Baul song 'Yemon Beni Temni Rabe':

The way my braid is, that's how it will stay.  
I'll get into the water, I'll splash water around,  
But I won't get my hair wet.  
I'll swim about this way and that way,  
I'll dive into the water and won't listen  
to what people say.  
I'll enjoy myself but not suffer because of it.  
Gosain Rasaraj says: 'Listen, my friend,  
That beauty leaves me speechless.  
I won't be chaste; I won't be unchaste.  
I won't leave my Lord.'

On a similar note, Sri Ramakrishna often told his householder disciples engaged in worldly activ-

ities: 'A boat may stay in water, but water should not stay in the boat. An aspirant may live in the world, but the world should not live within him.'

The Baul sips like a bee, as it were, the most suitable nectar from Hinduism, tantric Buddhism, and Sufi Islam and distils this concoction into a honey that gives him an intoxicating direct experience of God. This approach to God is perceived as too unconventional by people who lack the freedom and willingness to comprehend it. Therefore, Bauls have been labelled as 'mad' by orthodox prejudice for at least six hundred years. Breaking conventional social customs, Bauls deliberately dress in both Hindu and Muslim garments. They embrace all, disregarding religious, caste, and social restrictions.

Authentic worship of God, according to the Bauls, takes place only deep within the heart, where the divine *moner manush*, man of the heart, is enshrined. 'God is hidden in the heart of man and, neither priest nor prophet, nor the ritual of any organized religion, will help man to find him there,' writes Professor Edward Dimock, an eminent scholar of Bengali literature.

The village of Kenduli has been built up quite a bit since I attended Joydeb Mela in 1986, and the number of people attending this festival has dramatically increased. Purnadas Baul, who was one of the first Bauls to bring Baul songs and philosophy to the drawing rooms of Kolkata and the rest of the world, has done much to spread awareness of Baul traditions. Before Purnadas Baul, the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore added much to the popularity of Baul ways. Drawing inspiration from the Bauls, Rabindranath Tagore was a great supporter of Purnadas's father, Nabani-das Kshyepa Baul. He collaborated with Nabanidas Baul, supported him finan-

cially, and gave him land for a Baul institution.

While the popularity of the Bauls brought material success to some, it did more harm than good to the true Bauls who practise serious sadhana. It brought an influx of *shilpis*, professional singers, who dress like Bauls and sing Baul songs for money but do not practise Baul sadhana. According to some estimates, there were over two hundred *shilpis* at the 2008 Joydeb Mela, almost outnumbering the real Bauls. The *shilpis* cash in on the rupees, while the real Bauls are still poor.

Moreover, misunderstanding of the 'way of the Baul' has caused a lot of mischief at Joydeb Mela. Nowadays, aside from simple village folk, hordes of people from cities throng to Kenduli during Joydeb. Attracted by the term 'freedom', worldly city dwellers come to Joydeb Mela to indulge in licentious behaviour. They come to smoke ganja, get drunk, and behave badly with women unaware that their distorted understanding of freedom only leads to greater bondage and suffering.

Bauls are rather difficult to comprehend. I have lived with Bauls, read most books written on the Bauls, interviewed people on Baul philosophy, and seen most video clips on Bauls that are available. Rarely have I found worthy information and

Nabanidas Kshyepa Baul



accurate statements in books written by Westerners as well as Indians. Either the books are too scholarly or they deal with an author's misguided perception of what it means to be a Baul. One cannot understand the Bauls intellectually; one must intuitively feel them with one's heart.

Some statements in these books remind me of Sri Ramakrishna's fable of the blind men describing an elephant. Touching different parts of the animal, each of the blind men has the experience of the elephant, but that experience is only partial. The blind man who touches the ears of the elephant proclaims that the elephant is like a winnowing fan, while another who touches the leg says that the elephant is like a pillar.

One cannot label Bauls and put them into convenient categories. Baul sadhana practices differ from one Baul clan to another, from one *akbra*, Baul ashrama, to another. Perhaps it would be easier to herd cats than to start an organized group of Baul members. Yet there is a through-line of similarities among the different Bauls. Be they Vaishnava Bauls or Muslim Fakirs, be they grihastha, householder, Bauls or sannyasin Bauls, all Bauls believe that love for man is the path leading to love for the Divine. All Bauls undertake intense pranayama as well as various kundalini and yogic practices.

Nabanidas Baul became such an adept in breath control that he could stay under water for a long time. His wife, Brajabala Dasi, told a story about the time she and her neighbours thought that Nabanidas Baul had drowned. A neighbour saw him enter into a pond in Shantiniketan in the early morning hours but did not see him come back out. As villagers stood around the pond lamenting, Nabanidas Baul resurfaced and was startled by the commotion.

Bauls dress in flaming orange colours or in patchwork kurtas that reach down way past their knees. They do not cut their hair and generally tie it up in a top knot. When they dance, their steps follow practices so ancient that they are universal. An Australian aborigine elder joined Purnadas Baul during a performance in Australia. While Purnadas sang an old Baul song and performed dance steps

handed down by his ancestors, the aborigine elder sang an old aborigine song in the same tune following the same dance steps.

Traditionally, Bauls only used percussion and stringed instruments for accompaniment. Of these, perhaps the most famous one is the *gopiyantra* or *ektara*, a one-stringed drone instrument that is plucked by a wire plectrum. The drone sound reminds the Baul of the oneness of all. The next in importance is the *anandalahari* or *khamak*, which is a drum that is plucked. A pair of strings attached to the skin of an open one-headed drum is fixed to another small drum. By tightening and relaxing these strings, the Baul strikes them with a plectrum, creating a most exhilarating sound and beat. Other Baul instruments are the *dotara*, a four-stringed long-necked lute, the *duggi*, a kettle drum which is tied to the Baul's waist, *nupur*, anklets, *kartal*, cymbals, and the *khol*, a drum that is a Bengali village version of the *mridanga*. Today, some Bauls also use the harmonium, tabla, flute, and violin.

Bauls earn most of their living by singing in public places, at railroad stations, and by going from door to door. Their style of living is simple—some would say lowly—but their attitude and way of thinking is most high. They may sit on a used torn mat on the veranda of a clay hut and eat a simple meal, but they share it with their family and whoever happens to be around, and with such gusto that the simple food turns into nectar of the gods.

Bauls give respect to all. In the West we may say 'thank you', and think that we are done with giving respect. I remember Purnadas Baul scolding me once severely after I thanked Sri Manohar Kshyepa Baba, a most respected guru of many Bauls, for allowing me to interview him at Joydeb Mela. 'Who are you to thank such a great soul as Manohar Kshyepa Baba?' scolded Purnadas Baul. 'You are in no position to thank him. All you can do is pranam and beg for his blessings.' I learned a great lesson. Bauls regard their guru as God and pay the utmost respect to him.

Non-attachment is another trait of a real Baul. I remember Purnadas Baul telling me a story about

his childhood. His family moved often from village to village. At one time, they stayed longer at a particular village. Outside this village was a small roadside Kali temple. Purnadas Baul took a liking to this image and went there every day without telling his parents. Curious about where his son was going, Nabanidas Baul followed him one day. 'My son, you should never be attached to any external thing,' said Nabanidas Baul. The next day the family packed up and moved to another village.

Another story I heard from Purnadas Baul gave me a lesson in same-sightedness. Nabanidas Baul was gone for many weeks and his family was starving. Purnadas Baul's mother sent him out in search of his father. After searching for a while, the boy found his father in a small village that was suffering tremendous food shortages due to draught. They had asked Nabanidas Baul to stay and do a special sadhana to bring rain. Nabanidas Baul told the villagers to feed the children. When they did as told, not only did rain come but food also appeared miraculously, brought by neighbouring villagers. Purnadas Baul tapped his father's shoulder and mentioned that his family was starving while he was feeding children in this village. Nabanidas Baul replied: 'Who says that these are not my children? All are my children. I am feeding my children.'

### **Sri Ramakrishna Baul**

I am still waiting to meet Sri Ramakrishna as a Baul. Though many disregard the possibility of Sri Ramakrishna being born again—saying that he has given enough and does not need to return—I believe that Sri Ramakrishna will return as a Baul. Perhaps he will come in a hundred years, perhaps in two hundred years. In my humble opinion, the mood of a Baul might suit Sri Ramakrishna well. Outwardly the Baul shows tremendous emotion and drama, but inwardly the Baul is still like Shiva, soaked in the bliss of oneness.

It may be apt to conclude this article—my humble attempt at verbally using a few brush strokes to sketch a picture of a real Baul—by quoting Sri Ramakrishna talking about the Bauls:

Master (to M): 'I got a pain because I lay too long on one side while in samādhi yesterday at Adhar's house; so now I'll take Baburam with me when I visit the houses of the devotees. He is a sympathetic soul.'

With these words the Master sang:

How shall I open my heart, O friend?

It is forbidden me to speak.

I am about to die, for lack of a kindred soul

To understand my misery.

Simply by looking in his eyes,

I find the beloved of my heart;

But rare is such a soul,

who swims in ecstatic bliss

On the high tide of heavenly love.

Master: 'The Bāuls sing songs like that. They also sing another kind of song:

Stay your steps, O wandering monk!

Stand there with begging-bowl in hand,

And let me behold your radiant face.

'According to the Śakti cult the siddha is called a koul, and according to the Vedānta, a paramahansa. The Bāuls call him a sâi. They say, "No one is greater than a sâi." The sâi is a man of supreme perfection. He doesn't see any differentiation in the world. He wears a necklace, one half made of cow bones and the other of the sacred tulsi-plant. ...

'Once a Bāul came here. I asked him, "Have you finished the task of 'refining the syrup'? Have you taken the pot off the stove?" The more you boil the juice of sugar-cane, the more it is refined. In the first stage of boiling it is simply the juice of the sugar-cane. Next it is molasses, then sugar, then sugar candy, and so on. As it goes on boiling, the substances you get are more and more refined.

'When does a man take the pot off the stove? That is, when does a man come to the end of his sādhanā? He comes to the end when he has acquired complete mastery over his sense-organs. His sense-organs become loosened and powerless, as the leech is loosened from the body when you put lime on its mouth. In that state a man may live with a woman, but he does not feel any lust for her.'





# Vaishnava Literary Tradition of Assam

Dr Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti

(Continued from the previous issue)

IN HIS ASSAMESE RENDITION of the Ramayana 'Uttarakanda', Srimanta Shankaradeva's depiction of Sita also proves that he supported the concept of women's rights. In the original Ramayana Sita accepts the order for her banishment humbly. But the Sita of Srimanta Shankaradeva's *Uttarakanda Ramayana* speaks derisively to Rama:

*Ave rama svami sukhe bhunjantoka raja;  
Mari jao moi nimakhiti banamaja.*

Let my husband Rama enjoy his kingdom in happiness. I, the meek one, am going to die in the forest.<sup>2</sup>

In Srimanta Shankaradeva's version Sita did not accept her banishment without protest. Even when Rama sent Hanuman, Vibhishana, and others to Valmiki's ashrama to bring her back, Sita spoke with vengeance:

*Bolaibo gharani aro raghavara ghare;  
Nai teve nari nilajini mota pare.*

There would not be a greater unashamed woman on earth than me if I again speak of myself as Rama's wife (verse 299).

Sita added that she would have given up her life in Lanka itself had she known Rama to be so cruel:

*Moi jeve jano rama enuva nirdaya;  
Lankate tejilo hante pranaka nishchaya*  
(verse 303).

In these depictions of protest, a departure from the tradition of Sanatana Dharma, scholars might choose to see Srimanta Shankaradeva as a pioneer of feminism.

## Madhavadeva

Srimanta Shankaradeva composed two hundred and forty *bar-gits* in his inimitable style. These songs were sung by devotees in their prayer sessions and also as items of cultural entertainment. Once Kamala Gayan, a devotee, took the manuscript of *bar-gits* to his house to commit them to memory. Unfortunately, a forest fire ravaged Patbausi that very year. Kamala's house was also gutted and the entire manuscript of *bar-gits* was burnt to ashes. Srimanta Shankaradeva was upset by this unfortunate incident. He asked Madhavadeva to compose some songs. Madhavadeva was an expert in composing not only *bar-gits* but also *bhatima* and other verses. His poetic talent matched that of Srimanta Shankaradeva. He translated the *Bhakti-ratnavali* by Vishnupuri into Assamese.

Madhavadeva tried his best to collect those *bar-gits* of Srimanta Shankaradeva that some devotee or other had already memorized. In this way he fully recovered thirty-four *bar-gits* composed by Srimanta Shankaradeva. Next, he embellished those *bar-gits* that could only be partially recovered with his own compositions so as to make complete songs out of them. In all, one hundred and ninety-one *bar-gits* attributable to Srimanta Shankaradeva and Madhavadeva are now available.

Srimanta Shankaradeva and Madhavadeva jointly took up the task of editing the Assamese translation of the Ramayana by Madhava Kandali. This was needed to save this valuable work from being plagiarized by a contemporary author. But Madhava Kandali had translated only five cantos of the Ramayana. Therefore, Srimanta Shankaradeva decided to translate the remaining two cantos as well. He translated the last canto, 'Uttarakanda',

and charged Madhavadeva with the task of translating the first canto. This translation is called *Adikanda Ramayana*.

Madhavadeva also authored a book named *Nama-ghosha*. Srimanta Shankaradeva had asked him to write a book wherein devotees would be able to find the gist of the Eka-sharana Nama Dharma and also get help in developing devotion. Thus, this book was to be a mixture of philosophy and devotion, which was indeed a difficult task. But Madhavadeva's great intellect and devotion made that task possible. *Nama-ghosha* continues to attract devotees even now with its mix of deep philosophy and sweet devotional verses.

Madhavadeva also composed several plays. Among all the direct disciples of Srimanta Shankaradeva, it was only Madhavadeva who happened to be a playwright. In this way, he could continue with the *ankiya* play tradition initiated by his preceptor. But his plays constitute a different genre called *jhumura*. His plays include *Arjuna Bhanjana* (Breaking of Arjuna Trees), *Bhojana Vyavahara* (Eating Etiquette), *Chor Dhara* (Capture of a Thief), *Pimpara Guchowa* (Removal of Ants), *Bhumi Lutiowa* (Rolling on the Ground), *Rasa Jhumur* (Play of Delight), and *Kotora Khelowa* (Play with a Shell). He also authored two *kavyas* named *Rajasuya* (The Sacrifice of Kings) and *Janma Rahasya* (The Secret of Birth) on the instruction of Srimanta Shankaradeva.

Madhavadeva's creations have a singular style, different from that of his preceptor. His *bar-gits* are softer than those of Srimanta Shankaradeva in their wording. Most of these *bar-gits* are centred round the activities of child Krishna. The style of Madhavadeva's plays is also different from those of Srimanta Shankaradeva.

### Other Disciples

Ananta Kandali, another of Srimanta Shankaradeva's disciples, translated a part of the tenth canto of the Bhagavata. Srimanta Shankaradeva had set out to render the entire Bhagavata into Assamese.



Madhavadeva's residence in Narayanpur

When he was working on the tenth canto, Ananta Kandali requested the saint to involve him in this grand project, which plea was granted. The *kavya Kumara-Harana* (The Kidnapping of the Prince), based on the story of Princess Usha and Prince Aniruddha, is another of Ananta Kandali's major works. He also made an abridged version of the Ramayana in Assamese. But this was greatly influenced by Madhava Kandali's translation, being virtually an adaptation of the latter's work.

Ratnakara Kandali, an extremely talented poet, was also a disciple of Srimanta Shankaradeva. But he wrote very little. Srimanta Shankaradeva was highly impressed by Ratnakara's literary talent and magnanimously accommodated the latter's composition 'Sahasra Nama Britanta' in his magnum opus *Kirtana-ghosha*. It listed Ishvara's numerous names and highlighted their glory and was one of the select compositions prescribed for congregational prayer in Eka-sharana Nama Dharma.

Durgabar Kayastha, of the sixteenth century, was another poet who rendered the Ramayana into Assamese. Srimanta Shankaradeva's influence had clearly electrified the entire Assamese literary world and encouraged numerous budding writers. But though Durgabar Kayastha's *Giti-ramayana* (The Ramayana in Song) was influenced by the Vaishnava philosophy of Srimanta Shankaradeva, his rendition was not refined. It was suited only for singing as part of the indigenous folk dance *oja-pali*.

Gopaladeva, a disciple of Madhavadeva, authored several plays and hymns. His plays include *Janmayatra* (The Journey of Life), *Nandotsava* (The Festival of Joy), *Syamantaka Harana* (The

Stealing of the Syamantaka Gem), and *Uddhava-jnana* (Uddhava's Knowledge). His life story is very interesting. He was brought up in the Ahom capital Gargaon as a companion of the king's son, but later had to turn fugitive as his great physical prowess frightened the king. He and his mother migrated to the Koch kingdom, where he came in contact with Srimanta Shankaradeva. But he embraced the Eka-sharana Nama Dharma only after the saint passed away. He set up many Satras in different parts of Brahmaputra valley. A Satra is a residential institution created by Srimanta Shankaradeva for propagating the ideology of Eka-sharana Nama Dharma. Satras established by Srimanta Shankaradeva himself are known as Thans. Gopaladeva stressed on spreading the message of the saint among the downtrodden, especially tribal people.

Rama Saraswati was a poet of the sixteenth century. He recreated the Mahabharata in Assamese under the patronage of the Koch king Naranarayana. The king sent all the relevant scriptures available with him to the poet by bullock-cart. Several other poets—Gopinath Pathak, Kangsari Kayastha, Gabharu Kha, Vidya Panchanan, and Pitambar—also participated in this big project. In all, eight cantos of the epic were translated. Rama Saraswati was greatly influenced by Srimanta Shankaradeva. He also recreated the *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva. The original *Gita Govinda* differed a little from the Vaishnavism that Srimanta Shankaradeva preached—the latter did not lay any stress on *madhura rasa*, the sweet mood. So Rama Saraswati modified the text and minimized the stress on *madhura rasa*. All his writings exuded the Vaishnava flavour of Srimanta Shankaradeva type:

*Shuna sadhujana pada bharata samprati;  
Krishnaseva bine nai kaliyuge gati.  
Madhava charana pankaja kari sara;  
Bola rama rama kara purusha uddhara.*

O pious people, listen now to the verses of the Mahabharata. There is no way out other than worshipping the feet of Sri Krishna in the Kali era. Take resort at the lotus feet of Madhava. Chant the name 'Rama' and redeem your forefathers.

Baikunthanath or Bhattadeva was one of the prominent Vaishnava litterateurs of the post-Shankaradeva era. He was a disciple and successor of Srimanta Shankaradeva's direct disciple Damodaradeva. He was the Bhagavata reader of Barnagar town. He earned distinction by writing in prose, free from much poetic flavour. While the prose of Srimanta Shankaradeva's *ankiya* plays was poetic, Bhattadeva's *Bhagavata Katha* (The Story of the Bhagavata) and *Gita Katha* (The Story of the Gita) were true prose compositions, albeit with an implicit rhythm. He is known as the father of Assamese prose. Both these works were composed at the end of the sixteenth century. While *Bhagavata Katha* is largely narrative in style, *Gita Katha* deals with philosophy and is contemplative. Bhattadeva was a great scholar who won many debates. He was conferred the titles 'Kavi-ratna' and 'Bhagavata-bhattacharya' for his literary talent. *Vishnu-sahasra-nama*, and *Ratnavali Katha* (The Story of Ratnavali) are two of his other Assamese compositions. He authored several books in Sanskrit too. All these books highlight the ideology of Eka-sharana Nama Dharma.

Srimanta Shankaradeva's grandson Purushottam Thakur authored a book of prayer verses named *Naghosha* (New Verses) in the sixteenth century. It was styled after Madhavadeva's *Namaghosha* (Prayer Verses). Many such compositions were undertaken by the followers of Srimanta Shankaradeva, but very few of them have survived as they did not match the literary beauty of Srimanta Shankaradeva's and Madhavadeva's works. Copying the scriptures was a laborious task in those days and only the most important scriptures were reproduced. Padma-priya, Gopaladeva's daughter, who was one of the foremost disciples of Srimanta Shankaradeva, composed many prayer hymns. She is one of the first female poets of Indian vernacular literature.

Govinda Mishra was a disciple of Bhattadeva. His major work is *Krishna Gita*. He was a scholarly writer. He did not translate the Gita literally, he gave his own interpretations too. He also translated Bhattadeva's *Srimad-bhakti-viveka* into Assamese.

Aniruddhadeva was a disciple of Gopaladeva.

He authored a *kavya*—*Puranjana Upakhyana* (The Story of Puranjana), based on the fourth canto of Bhagavata—translated the entire fifth canto of the Bhagavata, and composed treatises, hymns, and songs reflecting the glory of Sri Krishna.

All his works were based on the Bhagavata. *Gitavali* (Collection of Songs) and *Bhaktimangal Ghosha* (Verses for Devotion and Well-being) are two of his important compositions. His songs and hymns became popular as he had sound knowledge of music.

Even after the passing away of Srimanta Shankaradeva, the Vaishnava literary tradition continues to be strongly active in Assam. The Than and Satra institutions have continued with this tradition. The Satradhikar, head of the Satra, is traditionally required to author at least one play in the *ankiya* style of Srimanta Shankaradeva when he assumes charge. Given that there are nine hundred and sixty-four Satras in Assam, and each of these has had between ten and fifteen Satradhikars since inception, we get an idea of the enormous amount of Vaishnava literature created by the followers of Srimanta Shankaradeva till date. The followers of Eka-sharana Nama Dharma have composed innumerable plays, *kavyas*, hymns, and other writings containing Vaishnava concepts. Every Than and Satra in Assam is a treasure house of Vaishnava literature. Important examples include *Shatrunjaya Kavya* by Raghunath Mahanta of Elengi Satra, translation of a part of the fourth canto of the Bhagavata by Vishnudeva Goswami of Auniati Satra, *Ajamila Upakhyana* play by Hariramadeva of Mayamara Satra, *Gitavali* by Sri Ramadeva of Kaljhar Satra, *Phalgu-yatra* (Play of Colours) by Yadumanideva of Bahbari Satra, and *Bhakti-chandra-mala* by Sri Ramadeva of Chaliha Bareghar Satra. Some compositions were undertaken under the patronage of Ahom kings too. For instance, Rama Mishra wrote *Vrindabana-charitra*, a travelogue on Vrindaban, in the seven-teenth century.



*Illustrated Bhagavata, by Shankaradeva (1539)*

Hagiographies, known as *charits* in Assamese, are a distinct category of literature of the post-Shankaradeva era. These are a rich treasure of anecdotes about the life of Srimanta Shankaradeva and his immediate disciples. Several authors like Chakrapani Vairagi, Daityari Thakur, Ramcharan Thakur, Ramananda Dwija, Bhushana Dwija, Vaikuntha Dwija, and Puwaram Mahanta have authored *charits* since the sixteenth century.

The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a new brand of writers who wrote about Vaishnava traditions and ideologies in modern prose. Lakshminath Bezbaruah wrote *Tattvakatha*, a treatise on Vaishnavism. Radhanath Phukan wrote scholarly commentaries on the Gita and *Brahma Sutra*. Bhuban Chandra Bhuyan wrote *Vaishnava Dharma ba Nama Dharma*, a valuable treatise on Eka-sharana Nama Dharma. Ilaram Das wrote *Namaghosha Rasamrit*, a commentary on Madhavadeva's *Namaghosha*.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the Assamese Vaishnava literature has been enriched by innumerable writers starting from Puroshottama Gajapati to reputed contemporary writers.

PB

## Notes and References

2. Srimanta Shankaradeva, *Uttarkanda Ramayana*, verse 23.
3. The present author has done a comparative study of all the available hagiographies and authored *Purnanga Katha Gurucharit*, a comprehensive research-based biography of Srimanta Shankaradeva. He has also authored a commentary on Madhavadeva's *Namaghosha*.

# The Tapasvin as a Poet: Kavyakantha Vasishtha Ganapati Muni

Dr Prema Nandakumar

(Continued from the previous issue)

**G**ANAPATI MUNI'S ESSAYS 'Panchama Mimamsa' and 'Panchajana Charcha' were of particular contemporary significance. In these texts the muni takes us back to the ancient Shastras to prove that there is no scriptural basis for untouchability. Caste has been stratified in the scriptures, but no particular caste was set apart as 'untouchable'. Due to indiscriminate intermingling of castes we have such groups as the Nishadas, Kiratas, Shabaras, and Pulindas. A certain distance is created when a group of people start taking beef and wine. Indeed, even a brahmana who sells milk falls from his caste! Taking us to the relevant portions of the Smritis associated with sages like Gautama, Yajnavalkya, and Manu, the muni argues that non-association—for certain reasons, like criminal activity or violation of marriage codes—does not mean the person concerned becomes an untouchable. It is not a physical rejection but an exile from the community's traditions: *aspr̥syatvena sarva-dharma-bahiṣkāro vyākhyātaḥ*.

It is interesting to learn that Ganapati Muni proposed a constitution for free India by way of aphorisms in 'Samrajya Nibandhana'. This contains suggestions for achieving a good administration and maintaining healthy social mores. The work is wrapped up with *saptamahāmaryādāḥ*, seven great commandments: you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not covet another's wife, you shall not drink intoxicants, you shall not speak a lie, you shall not speak scandal of others, you shall not betray.

As a disciple of Ramana Maharshi, Ganapati Muni was constantly exercised about the principles

of existence. What constitutes reality? How do humans get attuned to their existence on earth? Ganapati's works on this subject are of deep spiritual value. The most well-known among them is *Ramana Gita*. Three hundred verses, divided into eighteen chapters, bring to us the questions posed by disciples and the answers given by Ramana Maharshi at different times. Ganapati Muni has rendered them all into Sanskrit. Fortunately for us, T V Kapali Sastri has written a Sanskrit commentary titled 'Prakasha', which brings out the logical progression of the *Ramana Gita* as an enquiry into the nature of the Self. As we proceed with the work, we learn of the need for self-inquiry, the importance of meditation and repetition of the Name, the need and method of mind-control, the significance of rituals, the importance of a fraternal approach towards the whole of humankind, and the facets of bhakti. Among other works of Ganapati Muni on metaphysics, mention may be made of 'Vishwa-mimamsa' and 'Tantra-hridaya'.

It is a pity that despite Ganapati Muni's enormous scholarship and insight into the Vedic world, no standard work on the subject was authored by him. There are some stray notes which are revelatory. According to him, the Vedic mantras are recordings of great rishis whose spiritual practices enabled them to receive these mantras in their pristine purity. His approach to the Rig Veda was imbibed well by his disciple T V Kapali Sastri, who fortified himself further with the approaches of Sri Aurobindo to the Veda. Later, Kapali Sastri wrote a commentary, 'Siddhanjana' on the first 'Ashtaka' of the Rig Veda.

### Vedic Origins of Epic Characters

Like the ancients, Ganapati Muni also chose poetry as the vehicle to convey his views on such varied subjects as ayurveda, astronomy, and astrology. 'Chikitsanushasana' deals with various ailments like asthma, tuberculosis, and piles. With 'Bharata-charitra-mimamsa' we reach an area that never fails to excite our enquiring mind. The work is an elucidation of certain chosen elements from Vyasa's Mahabharata, and was originally delivered as a series of lectures at the Andhra University in 1934. That was the year when Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was vice chancellor of the university, and it is thrilling to imagine the philosopher-statesman and the scholar-ascetic on the same stage, leading the audience back to the days of the Mahabharata. The question as to the date of the epic's composition has intrigued scholars for a long time. When was it written down? One hundred and twenty-seven generations before Chandragupta Maurya? The *yuga* is definitely 'Kali' as the epic statements help us deduce. The 'Yuga-vichara' chapter says that the Pandavas lived during the middle period of the composition of the Rig Veda mantras. And Vyasa, the author of the epic, belonged to a period prior to that of the Upanishads. Vaishampayana lived when the Vedangas, Vedic auxiliaries, were being composed. Sauti Ugrashravas belonged to Ashoka's times. So runs the argument.

But how does one trace the Mahabharata characters to the Vedas? The muni embarks on a Sherlock Holmesian search for the origins of the Karna myth in Vedic hymns related to Surya. The commentator Sayanacharya gives him a helping hand by referring to the human descent of the Sun: 'There was a king Svashva. Desiring a son, he performed penances addressed to Surya. A son, verily like the sun, was born to him. It is said that he battled with a rishi called Etasha.' The muni goes on to say that Etasha, also known as Kutsa, was saved from Svashva's son by Indra. The Rig Vedic myth of Indra taking apart the wheel of Surya's chariot connects Karna to Sushna, the son of Svashva who was like the sun himself in brilliance.

Again, Ganapati Muni leads us up another trail beginning with Krishna and going back to Indra. The Rig Veda speaks of Indra as the charioteer of Kutsa: *Indrā-kutsā vahamānā rathena*.<sup>5</sup> With the backing of the legend of the charioteer and the critical failure of the wheel of Karna's chariot, one nods in agreement when Ganapati Muni says that Krishna was an incarnation of Indra. We get to know of yet another myth about how the heavenly damsel Vikuntha performed penance to get a son like Indra. Vikuntha's son is Vaikuntha, Krishna. As we proceed slowly, we get to know of other characters like Devaki and Kamsa who have Vedic origins.

The five Pandavas and Abhimanyu are also traced to Vedic myths by Ganapati Muni. The most interesting character in this memorable adventure is Draupadi who is linked with Ghosha, the daughter of Kakshivan, and a poetess of the Rig Veda. In her long prayer to the Ashvins, Ghosha sings:

You have been wise, Ashvins. Bring forth your chariot to the singer's people, like Kutsa to his. The bee, Ashvins, gathers your honey in her mouth, as promptly as the maiden goes to her love-tryst (10.40.6).

Since Kutsa has already been equated with Arjuna in the earlier chapters, it is understood that Arjuna taking Draupadi to his brothers is indicated here. With his unrivalled mastery of the Vedas, Ganapati Muni brings together well-known Vedic verses to posit the origins of Drona, Ashvathama, and others.

### Sanskrit: A Living Language

Apart from using prose for his commentaries, Ganapati Muni attempted a full-scale novel too and proved that Sanskrit is a living language. The novel *Purna* confirms that Sanskrit is easily comprehended, for it has the simplest word combinations for the writer's desk. The novel, left incomplete due to the author's sudden passing away in 1936, was completed by his son, Mahadeva Sastri. It may be mentioned here that a Telugu version of the novel was published by the author in the monthly *Bharati*.

Ganapati Muni's prime inspiration for writing a novel in Sanskrit must have come from Banabhatta's *Kadambari*. There is plenty of romance and old-world colour in *Purna*. Anga, Magadha, and Andhra are three kingdoms. Anga is ruled by the good king Satyasena. Andhra and Magadha have Suchandra and Pradyotana as kings. Both of them are ambitious. Pradyotana, in spite of being a friend of Satyasena, attacks Anga and drives out the king. Satyasena's sister Manimala is the mother of Purna. Satyasena's daughter is Rajasena, who wants to destroy Pradyotana and his family to avenge her father.

With both Anga and Magadha coming under Pradyotana's harsh suzerainty, people become restive and some secret organizations take shape. The patriot in Ganapati Muni must have drawn from Bankim Chandra's *Ananda Math* to create his Udayankara Sangha.

Purna, Satyasena's niece is the image of an ideal woman. Oriented to tradition, she is fearless, like a classical heroine. In the sixth chapter we see Virasimha stalking her. She enters the temple of Vana Durga. Virasimha follows her and asks: 'Auspicious one! Who are you?' She replies: 'I am a brahmana girl.' He decides to get her for himself but his advances are contemptuously repelled. When he catches hold of her, she stabs him, leaving him senseless. Since Purna wanted only to immobilize Virasimha and not kill him, she places some herbal juices on his wound and binds it with his upper cloth to stop the bleeding. She also utters a prayer for his well being. When he returns to consciousness and his eyes fall upon Purna's face, he exclaims: 'You demoness!' Purna says softly: 'The demoness went away after humbling the pride of the demon. This is your sister who wants you to live. Brother! Forget my deed. Turn to good ways and live long!'

Such is the simplicity of style, the easy movement of the story, and the idealism that the muni places before the youth of India. Like Bhavananda of *Ananda Math*, Purna wishes to be a lifelong celibate and work for the weal of her motherland. Getting the women characters together at one stage in the tale, the guru Srinatha Bhatta speaks of woman-

hood as the triumph of Mahashakti: 'My children! It is Parashakti who moves the entire universe. She glows beyond all the worlds. She illumines the world as well. Above the world is Sadashiva. He has four bodies: the space, which is conditioned as Ishvari, the queen of the worlds; the sun, conditioned as the Gayatri, guardian of all lives; the earth, conditioned as Lakshmi, who upholds lives; the moon, conditioned as Kali, who destroys lives.'

His entire speech is a paean to womanhood, underlining the importance Ganapati Muni gave to women. Srinatha Bhatta's advice to the assembled women is memorable. For instance, when Bhramari confesses to him her sorrow on her mother's serious illness, he says: 'My child, do not sorrow. All the strength won through years of striving are destroyed by allowing sorrow to seep into you. It destroys your strength of purpose.'

Ganapati Muni was a seer, a *mantra-draṣṭā*, and there are *mantra* phrases and verses even in this novel. The mere reading of *Purna* would be yoga, and would inspire one to become an ideal child of Mother India. Indeed, this is so with all the writings of this great seer who triumphantly proclaimed the wealth as also the health of India's Sanatana Dharma, which is not only ancient but is also eternal.



## Reference

5. Rig Veda, 5.31.9.

## The Tantric Way to Supreme Bliss

On the occasion of a great delight being obtained, or on the occasion of delight arising from seeing a friend or relative after a long time, one should meditate on the delight itself and become absorbed in it, then one's mind will become identified with it.

Wherever the mind of the individual finds satisfaction [without agitation], let it be concentrated on that. In every such case the true nature of the highest bliss will manifest itself.

—Vijnana Bhairava, 51, 54



# Vedanta-sara

Swami Bhaskareswarananda

(Continued from the previous issue)

**6. Adhikārī tu vidhivad-adhīta-veda-vedāṅga tvenāpātato'dhigatākhila-vedārtho'smin janmani janmāntare vā kāmya-niṣiddha-varjana-puraḥsaram nitya-naimittika-prāyaścittopāsanaṇuṣṭhānena nirgata-nikhila-kalmaṣatayā nitānta-nirmala-svāntaḥ sādhana-catuṣṭaya-sampannaḥ pramātā.**

*The competent student is an aspirant who, by studying the Vedas and the Vedāṅgas (books auxiliary to the Vedas) in accordance with the prescribed method, has obtained a general comprehension of the entire Vedas; who, being absolved from all sins in this or in a previous life—by the avoidance of the actions known as kāmya (rites performed with a view to attaining a desired object) and niṣiddha (those forbidden in the scriptures), by the performance of actions called nitya (daily obligatory rites) and naimittika (obligatory on special occasions), as well as by penance and devotion—has become entirely pure in mind; and who has adopted the four sādhanas (means to the attainment of spiritual knowledge).*

**N**OW SADANANDA DESCRIBES, as mentioned in the scriptures, the person psychologically fit for the study of scriptures and the realization of the ideal. The fundamental point here is a heart purified through spiritual practice. Your pure heart is the language of the soul.

The text comprises the edited notes of Swami Bhaskareswarananda's classes on *Vedanta-sara*, conducted between 8 December 1954 and 20 January 1955. The notes—taken down by some residents of the Ramakrishna Math, Nagpur—have been edited and reconstructed by Swami Brahmeshananda, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh.

Without self-control, purification of heart is not possible. Sri Ramakrishna has said that if there is a hole in the pitcher, all water will flow out.

*Adhīta-veda-vedāṅga*: First of all, perform karma as described in the *karma-kāṇḍa*, ritualistic portion, of the Vedas. By performing karma and following its minutest details, an effect is produced within you. That is why the chanting of Vedic mantras with exact intonation is advised. If you do not follow the minutest details, the stated effect will not be produced within you. *Vedāṅga* means all these details.

*Āpātata*: This indicates that you must have a general understanding of the Shastras. For example, Sri Ramakrishna has advanced this idea: 'service of humans as God'. With this thought and understanding, do work in all its details. Do not have any desire for heavenly or worldly pleasures. At the same time stop all forbidden work, *niṣiddha* karma. Purity is the aim, and by doing forbidden karma the heart becomes impure; and due to the darkening of the intellect, understanding is not possible. Avoid bad thinking, bad actions, and so forth.

*Nitya-naimittika* karmas: *Nitya* karma means daily allotted duties. They must be done regularly and sincerely. *Naimittika* karma means occasional duties, for example, those on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna and such special occasions. On that day some special devotional activities like study of scriptures, japa, singing of devotional songs, meditation, and such other practices are to be performed. On special days japa and meditation must be done with special zeal and dynamism, with more devotion and concentration. Take out more time for them on special occasions and try to make a special connection with Sri Ramakrishna by doing special works out of love for him.



Nowadays there are no *yajñas*, sacrifices, so the allotted duties, japa, meditation, prayer, and the like are to be considered as *yajñas*. Let us keep this thought in mind: ‘These duties have to be done by me and if I don’t do them, evil will follow.’

*Prāyaścitta*, acts of repentance: If you have done any *niṣiddha* karma, then you must feel sorry within. Instead of relishing it, we must feel pain. Through this feeling purification of the heart takes place. Hence, undertake fasting, japa, and other practices according to your own convenience. Find out your faults and pray. This is *prāyaścitta*. By such spiritual practice your mental impurities will be washed away. Good actions alone are not enough. Forbidden acts must be given up. These are self-initiated troubles that bring physical and mental harm. If you happen to do them, then realize your shortcomings and try to correct them. Otherwise, on one side you are performing expiatory acts and on the other you are laughing; this will not lead to purification.

*Śama, dama, titikṣā*: Calmly endure honour and dishonour, happiness and misery, with the help of knowledge. Live on bare necessities. Do not feel elated in happiness or on getting honour, and do not get depressed in suffering or on being insulted. Transcending physical and psychological reaction through knowledge is *titikṣā*.

#### 7. *Kāmyāni—svargādiṣṭa-sāadhanāni jyotiṣṭomādini.*

*Sacrifices such as jyotiṣṭoma, which would enable their performers to get the desired fruits—living in heaven, and the like—are known as kāmya karma.*

Do not undertake works to fulfil worldly desires or gain heavenly enjoyment. Work unselfishly, always keeping the spiritual ideal in view. In spiritual life we must know clearly which works are to be done and which to be avoided. There is a sort of intoxication in performing karma. Due to human instinct a desire for name, position, power in the world—or at least in the ashrama—arises. So, be cautious while doing work, otherwise even ashrama work will become *kāmya* karma.

#### 8. *Niṣiddhāni—narakādy-aniṣṭa-sāadhanāni brāhmaṇa-hananādini.*

*Actions such as the slaying of a brahmana, which bring about undesired results as going to hell, are niṣiddha karma, forbidden acts.*

#### 9. *Nityāni—akaraṇe pratyavāya-sāadhanāni sandhyā-vandanādini.*

*Daily rites such as sandhyā-vandanā, the non-performance of which causes harm, are called nitya karma.*

#### 10. *Naimittikāni—putra-janmādy-anubandhini jāteṣṭy-ādini.*

*Jāteṣṭi sacrifices, which are performed subsequent to the birth of a son, and the like, are called naimittika karma, rites to be observed on special occasions.*

#### 11. *Prāyaścittāni—pāpa-kṣaya-sāadhanāni cāndrāyaṇādini.*

*Rites such as cāndrāyaṇa, which are instrumental in the expiation of sin, are prāyaścittas, penances.*

#### 12. *Upāsanāni—saguṇa-brahma-viśaya-mānasa-vyāpāra-rūpāni śāṇḍilya-vidyādini.*

*Mental activities relating to Saguna Brahman, such as are described in the Shandilya Vidya, are upāsanās, devotions.*

#### 13. *Eteṣāṃ nityādinām buddhi-śuddhiḥ paramḥ prayojanam-upāsanānām tu cittaikāgryam ‘tam-etam-ātmānam vedānuvacanena brāhmaṇā vividīṣanti yajñena’ ityādi-śruteḥ ‘tapasā kalmaṣaṃ hanti’ ityādi-smṛteṣā.*

*Of these, nitya and other works mainly serve the purpose of purifying the mind; but the upāsanās chiefly aim at the concentration of mind, as is described in such Shruti passages as ‘Brahmanas seek to know this Self by the study of the Vedas, by sacrifice’ [Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 4.4.22], as well as in such Smṛiti passages as ‘They destroy sins by practising austerities’ [Manu Smṛiti 12.104].*

*Upāsana* means regular bhajana, meditation, japa, and other practices. There is a technical difference between *upāsana* and jnana, knowledge. *Upāsana* pertains to Saguna Brahman. Jnana is for higher consciousness, for those who have developed the conviction that the world is unreal and Brahman alone is real. For common people *upāsana* on Saguna Brahman is prescribed. This is based on the subject-object consciousness: 'I am and God is', 'he is the master and we are his servants', 'he is the adored one and we are the worshippers'. By regularly performing such *upāsana* the heart is purified and then you become capable of meditating on Nirguna Brahman and understanding the scriptures as well. In jnana the aspirant has the consciousness that 'I' and 'the world' do not exist, all is Brahman alone.

Sage Shandilya performed *upāsana* and attained samadhi. On coming back from samadhi, he declared that all was Brahman: '*Sarvam khalvidam brahma*', and taught the Shandilya Vidya. Out of love for the Beloved develops concentration. Karma purifies the heart, and by *upāsana*, love for the Chosen Ideal, concentration grows.

Sadananda says that whatever he has said about karma and *upāsana* are not his own ideas but what has been said in the Shastras. The seers of the Shastras lived their lives accordingly and attained the goal. Hence, he prescribes performing work as enjoined in the scriptures and not according to one's whims, which may create problems.

**14. Nitya-naimittikayoḥ upāsanaṇām  
tvavāntara-phalaṁ pitṛloka-satyalo-  
kā-prāptiḥ 'karmanā pitṛlokaḥ vidyayā  
devalokaḥ' ityādi-śruteḥ.**

*The secondary results of the nitya and the naimittika karma and of the upāsana are the attainment of the pitṛloka and the satyaloka respectively; as in the Shruti passages, 'By sacrifice the world of the fathers, by knowledge (upāsana) the world of the devas (is gained)' [Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 1.5.16].*

Although you have no desire for heavens and the like—and are performing karma and *upāsana* only

for purification—an additional positive fruit or effect of your work will also occur: going to *brahma-loka*, *satyaloka*, or another high sphere. You will come in contact with higher, more evolved souls and your spiritual life will develop further. The aspirant goes to different spheres according to his or her psychological development. The person who has almost attained full realization goes to *brahmaloka*.

The author is quoting the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* to further stress the point that love and devotion will grow through karma and *upāsana*.

**15. Sādhanaṇi—nityānitya-vastu-  
vivekehāmutrārtha-phala-bhoga-virāga-  
śamādi-ṣaṭka-sampatti-mumukṣutvāni.**

*The means to the attainment of knowledge are: discernment between things permanent and transient; renunciation of the enjoyment of the fruits of actions in this world and hereafter; the six treasures, such as control of the mind; and the desire for spiritual freedom.*

It was told that the *adhikārin*, competent person, must practise brahmacharya, karma, *upāsana*, and so forth. But the fundamental psychological means are *sādhana catuṣṭaya*, fourfold practice. All the earlier means will be effective if you will practise these four.

(To be continued)

**T**he difference in understanding of spiritual truths that we find among people is due to the level and degree of purity, which comes through the practice of continence and through leading one's own life with discernment and dispassion. To the extent you are pure, you will comprehend the Truth. Hence, we find that a monk endowed with such purity and noble character comprehends spiritual truths in the twinkling of an eye. On the other hand, a scholar leading an impure life and immersed in lust and greed cannot follow the spirit of the scriptures even if he studies them for ten hours a day. He would end up with either not understanding or misunderstanding their purport.

—Swami Bhaskareswarananda

# Mahendranath Gupta: A Guide to Dakshineswar and Kshipur

Swami Chetanananda



**B**LESSED ARE THE PLACES where incarnations of God are born and raised, where they live, travel, and pass away. Those spots become holy and attract pilgrims, historians, writers, poets, artists, and tourists throughout the ages. One of the most wonderful gifts of God is that of inquisitiveness, the desire to know. When children begin to talk, they ask questions: Who? Why? When? How? Where? What? Similarly, when we visit those holy places, we ask a guide to tell us every detail of the stories connected with those divine beings. Thus, we try to visualize the divine play of the avatars through the guide's descriptions.

Of course there is a gulf of difference between the tourists and the pilgrims visiting a holy place. On the one hand, tourists bring cameras, take pictures of themselves with a temple in the background, buy souvenirs and mementos, shop for loved ones, eat in good restaurants, and tell their stories to friends upon returning home. On the other hand, pilgrims fast and bathe in holy rivers or springs, buy flowers and fruits to offer to the deity, engage a priest-guide to perform worship of the deity, and learn from him the significance of such vibrant places. Pilgrims practise austerities, pray and meditate for some days, and finally return home with a deep impression of God.

In the Ramayana we come across a few places connected with Ramachandra: He was born in Ayodhya; he married in Mithila; and during his fourteen-year banishment he lived in Chitrakut, Dandakaranya, Panchavati, Rameshwaram, and Sri Lanka. In the Bhagavata we find that Krishna was born in Mathura, was raised in Gokula and Vrindaban, and spent his adult life in Mathura and Dwaraka; and we also find him in other places such as Hastinapur, Kurukshetra, and Prabhas. In the Bible we learn that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, and that he travelled through Judea, Samaria, Galilee, and Jerusalem. The scriptures, however, give us no detailed description of those holy places. Again, when we visit holy places, the priests or tourist guides tell us things about those places that may be only partly true; they often embellish or distort history, concoct stories about the avatars, and describe some miracles that they performed.

In *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play* Swami Saradananda described how Chaitanya discovered the sacred places in Vrindaban:

It is said that Chaitanya was the first to experience a manifestation of the divine presence in Vrindaban. Long before his advent, the holy spots

of Vraja were almost forgotten. When Chaitanya travelled in those places, he ascended to the higher plane of consciousness and experienced whatever Krishna's lila [divine play] had occurred there. In fact, Bhagavan Krishna enacted the same lila long before in the same place. His disciples—Rupa, Sanatan, and others—were the first to accept these revelations, and later all Indians believed what the disciples told them.<sup>1</sup>

In the *Gospel*, Mahendranath Gupta, M, immortalized many persons and places connected with Sri Ramakrishna; had he not done this, they would have passed into oblivion. M lived for forty-six years after the Master passed away. During this period he visited Dakshineswar and Kashipur many times and acted as a guide to devotees and distinguished guests. His eyewitness accounts of the Master penetrated deeply into the hearts of those visitors and still have a profound effect on all of us. M had a tremendous passion for truth, a love for history, and an objective mind. He did not dilute the freshness of the original story. M told visitors, 'The avatara has just come, so here everything is fresh.'<sup>2</sup>

Swami Nityatmananda paid seven visits to Dakshineswar and Kashipur with M, and in *Srima Darshan* he recorded his experiences in detail. M pointed out the areas in those two holy places that were connected with the Master. This record is extremely precious to devotees and admirers of Sri Ramakrishna. While reading it they can visualize what happened where in these locations so important to the Master's life, and they will not have to depend on a priest or on tour guides. I have compiled and translated these entries from *Srima Darshan* below,<sup>3</sup> so we can see those holy places through the eyes of M.

### Visiting the Dakshineswar Temple Garden

Ramakrishna often encouraged his disciples and devotees to have picnics in the Panchavati, and these were festive occasions for the young disciples. Swami Vivekananda recalled:

The solitude of the Panchavati, associated with

the various realizations of the Master, was also the most suitable place for our meditation. Besides meditation and spiritual practices, we used to spend a good deal of time there in sheer fun and merrymaking. Shri Ramakrishna also joined in with us, and by taking part enhanced our innocent pleasure. We used to run and skip about, climb on the trees, swing from the creepers, and at times hold merry picnics. On the first day that we picnicked the Master noticed that I myself had cooked the food, and he partook of it. I knew that he could not take food unless it was cooked by Brahmins, and therefore I had arranged for his meal at the Kali temple. But he said, 'It won't be wrong for me to take food from such a pure soul as yourself.' In spite of my repeated remonstrations, he enjoyed the food I had cooked that day.<sup>4</sup>

After Sri Ramakrishna's passing away the devotees sometimes held picnics in the Dakshineswar temple garden as they had done during his lifetime. One such occasion was on 18 October 1923, during the Durga Puja celebrations. M joined the devotees at the temple, arriving at 11.30 a.m. with Dr Durgapada Ghosh. M removed his shoes and went to the Master's room, where he sat on a foot-mat near the north side of the small cot. This is where he used to sit during the Master's lifetime. One can see the Ganges through the western door from that spot. M sat there and meditated along with the devotees. From the west side he put his hands under the mattress of the big cot where the Master used to sleep. The Master used to sit at the centre of the small cot facing the east, so M touched his head on that spot, just as he used to bow down to him in those days.<sup>5</sup>

Someone asked M: 'Which pictures were here during the Master's time?' M pointed out the pictures of Rama and Sita, Prahlada, Dhruva, Jesus, and Chaitanya singing Sankirtan. M then left the Master's room and went to the northern veranda. Jagabandhu asked him: 'Where did the Master go into samadhi while listening to Swamiji sing?'<sup>6</sup> M pointed out the south-eastern corner of the veranda and bowed down to that spot. He said: 'The Master stood here, leaning his back against the wall.

His eyes became still and a divine bliss spread over his face. His form was an embodiment of peace and love. ... This was the first time I saw samadhi—a state of uninterrupted bliss beyond happiness and misery' (3.240; 5.118). He then pointed to the upper step of the veranda's north-east corner and said: 'The Master would stand there and say goodbye to the devotees.' M then came to the south-east veranda of the Master's room and pointed out where Hazra would sit on his asana. Now there is a mat where the Master's nephews sit and talk to devotees. M went to the Radhakanta temple and received sanctified water from the priest.

Readers of Sri Ramakrishna's life know the story of Krishna's broken foot and how the Master repaired it. Nirmal Kumar Roy supplied an important piece of information about that image in his book *Dakshineswar Kali Mandirer Itivritta*:

The present image of Krishna is made of black stone and its height is 21½ inches, and Radha's image is made of eight metals and its height is 16 inches. These two images are now on the main altar and worshipped daily. This image of Krishna was made during Rani Rasmani's time but was kept in a separate room, because the Master advised her to continue worshipping the broken Krishna. Now that original broken Krishna is in the north room of the Krishna temple. It was worshipped till 1929. Then while the image was being refurbished, the foot again broke and it was temporarily repaired. Finally in 1930, the trustees of the Kali temple decided to install the spare one on the main altar and replace the broken one.<sup>7</sup>

M bowed down to Lord Shiva from the courtyard and then went to the Kali temple. He then bowed down to the Divine Mother and meditated in front of her. Nakul, Ramlal's son, gave sanctified water to M and put a vermilion mark on his forehead.

When M was in the Natmandir, Amrita asked: 'Where was the Master when you asked him if there would be any more singing on that evening during your fourth visit?' M showed him the spot in the middle of the Natmandir. Pointing to the second

pillar to the left, from the north, M said: 'As he listened to Nilkantha's *yatra* performance, the Master embraced this pillar and wept.' M then embraced the pillar.

M was a wonderful guide. He showed visitors to the temple garden important spots as well as those that are less significant, so that they could have a complete picture of that holy place. He took devotees to the kitchen where Mother Kali's food is cooked and to the room where it is stored. He also showed them the western ghat of the Gazi-tala pond, east of the Kali temple, where the Mother's puja utensils were washed. From the ghat he pointed out Jadu Mallick's garden house, where the Master would go for a walk. The Master was fond of Jadu Mallick, and the caretaker of his garden house was very devoted to the Master.

Mr Jinwala said to M: 'It is said that Ramakrishna tried to kill himself with Kali's sword when he did not have the vision of the Divine Mother. Have you heard this from the Master?'

M: 'No, I didn't hear that.'

Dr De Mello: 'Is it in the *Gospel* that you recorded?'

M: 'No, it is not in the *Gospel*. Someone might have written about it, but I didn't.'

Dr De Mello: 'The Master himself was God. Then why did he try to kill himself in order to see God?'

M: 'The Master said that the Divine Mother had taken the cosmic form. She herself was manifest in the Master's body. The Goddess said to him his form was a special manifestation among all forms. Out of longing for Mother, as a devotee, the Master tried to kill himself. He himself was a devotee and also God.'<sup>8</sup>

M crossed the courtyard to the Chandni ghat and then walked down the steps to the Ganga. He sprinkled the holy Ganga water on his head, bowed down to Mother Ganga, and repeated a mantra. On his way to the Nahabat, he touched his head to the semicircular veranda of the Master's room. Pointing to the north-west corner of the northern veranda, M said: 'One day I saw the Master

himself sweeping this place with a broom. Seeing me, he said, "The Divine Mother walks here." He used to see the Mother's divine play with his open eyes' (4.84).

Next, M bowed down to the front steps of the Nahabat, saying: 'Holy Mother, the Master, and the devotees walked over these steps while entering the room. This Nahabat is a new Shakti Pith [a holy place consecrated to the Divine Mother]. It was Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's place of tapasya. She lived here for a long time. She was extremely shy. There were bamboo curtains all around the veranda, and she lived here like a bird in a cage. Setting aside her personal comfort, she served the Master. In this small room she lived with Golapma, Yogin-ma, Sister Lakshmi, and sometimes with Gauri-ma. Here also she stored the Master's groceries and other necessities. Once a day, at three o'clock in the morning, she would go to the jungle to answer the call of nature and then bathe in the Ganga. She would practise japa and meditation, and then cook for the Master. What superhuman patience, forbearance, self-control, renunciation, and self-sacrifice she had!' (10.184-5).

M bowed down to the first step of the stairs to the upper floor of the Nahabat and remarked: 'Holy Mother used to sit here and repeat her mantra. Sitting here for long hours caused her to develop rheumatism, which continued throughout her life.' M then went to the Bakul-tala ghat and pointed to a cement platform to the west of the path leading to the Panchavati. He said: 'I saw the Master seated here forty-one years ago. I vividly remember it now, and it feels like it happened yesterday.'

M touched his head on the middle of the Bakul-tala ghat and said: 'Just before Chandramani passed away, her body was brought here. She was lying on a rope cot. Two legs of the cot were in the Ganga and the other two legs were on the cement ghat. Holding his mother's feet, the Master said tearfully, "Mother, who are you who carried me in your womb?" He meant that she was not an ordinary mother. She must be like Kausalya, Devaki, Mayadevi, Mary, and Shachi—who were mothers

of Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, and Chaitanya respectively' (10.183-4).

'Narendra sat on the south embankment of this ghat and sang for the Master an Agamani song [a special song that is sung inviting Mother Durga to come for her worship] that he had learned shortly before.' M bowed down to that spot (10.184).

Seeing a Shiva image inside the Sadhan-kutir, he remarked: 'During the Master's time, this brick building and the Shiva image were not here. There was only a thatched hut with a mud floor.'

M circumambulated the altar that surrounded the banyan tree in the Panchavati; then he touched the second, third, and fourth steps on its southern stairs and bowed down. He said: 'The Master used to sit here and put his feet on the lower step. He would talk about God with Keshab Sen, Vijaykrishna Goswami, and other devotees.' Standing at the north-west corner of the Panchavati, M related one of his sweetest memories: 'One day from here I saw the Master coming from the pine grove. There was a thick dark cloud behind him and it was reflected on the Ganga' (5.113).

M touched and bowed down to the ashwatttha tree in the Panchavati, which the Master had planted himself. He then went under the madhavi vine, which is nearly fifty feet long and connects the banyan and the ashwatttha trees. The Master brought that plant from Vrindaban and planted it there himself. M bowed down to it and said: 'This madhavi is very dear to us. The Master took care of it like a mother and helped it to grow. The divine touch of his hand lives within this vine. Blessed is this plant! Perhaps this vine is a great soul, living incognito like the Yamala and Arjuna trees who were Jaya and Vijaya, the gatekeepers of Vishnu, but were cursed and became trees' (10.179-80). Pointing to the south-west step of the Panchavati, M said: 'On his birthday, the Master sat on this step and gave advice to Vijaykrishna Goswami and Kedar Chattopadhyay, who were seated to his left. Tota Puri lived in the open space of the Panchavati and the Master visited him there quite often' (5.113).

On the way to the Bel-tala from the Panchavati, M pointed out a spot on the east side of the path and mentioned: 'There was a fence here in which one of the Master's feet became stuck. He fell down and broke his left arm. He was in ecstasy and had no body-consciousness.'

M then went to the Bel-tala, where the Master had practised tantric sadhana. Around the bel tree is a circular altar that is two feet high. M circumambulated it, keeping the altar to his right.

Pointing to a spot to the east of the altar, M said: 'One day, according to the instruction of the Master, a devotee [M himself] was meditating facing the east. A few hours passed. The Master came to see the devotee and stood in front of him. Seeing the Master, the devotee was overwhelmed with joy and bowed down to him. He saw his Chosen Deity on whom he had been meditating in his heart' (5.114-15). He bowed down to that spot where he had once seen the Master standing. He then sat on the altar to meditate and asked the devotees to do the same.

Later, M pointed to the embankment next to the Ganga and said: 'At midnight the Master would pace back and forth here and listen to the *anahata* sound [music of the spheres].'

M went to the Kuthi, mansion, and entered the south-west room. He bowed down and said: 'The Master lived in this room for sixteen years. His mother also lived here. He had many visions and spiritual experiences in this room. Trailokya, Mathur's son, used to live upstairs when he visited Dakshineswar. The Master's nephew Akshay died here in 1869, and in 1871 the Master moved to the room in the north-west corner of the temple complex and his mother moved to the upper floor of the Nahabat.'

Nirmal Kumar Roy wrote in *Dakshineswar Kali Mandirer Itivritta*:

In the early days, Rani Rasmani and Mathur arranged for the Master's stay in the Kuthi; but when Akshay died, the Master did not want to stay there anymore. However, an opportunity soon came for the Master to move from the Kuthi, as

Mathur wanted to repair and paint the building. So it was arranged that the Master move temporarily to the north-west corner room of the temple complex, which had been used as the storeroom for the Vishnu temple, while his mother would move to the upper room of the Nahabat. When the repairs and painting were done, the Master said that he did not want to return to the Kuthi. Mathur granted the Master's request and moved the Vishnu temple supplies to one of the rooms in the eastern complex.<sup>9</sup>

M stood on the southern ghat of the goose pond, which is located just to the east of the Panchavati. He said: 'The Master always filled his water pot at this goose pond and used it after answering the call of nature. He never used Ganga water, because it is holy. Once the Master stood on this ghat and said to Narendra: "Come a little more often. You are a newcomer. Haven't you noticed how a man and a woman meet frequently after their first acquaintance? It intensifies love."'

(To be concluded)

## Notes and References

1. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. Swami Chetanananda (St Louis: Vedanta Society, 2003), 636.
2. Swami Nityatmananda, *Srima Darshan* (Calcutta: General Printers, 1968), 3.223.
3. i) 1 December 1923, 4.61-70; ii) 18 October 1923, 3.235-44; iii) 14 January 1924, 8.18-29; iv) 21 March 1924, 4.78-85; v) 30 March 1924, 5.109-24; vi) 30 November 1924, 10.166-93; vii) 28 January 1926, 13.220-7.
4. His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 1.132-3.
5. *Srima Darshan*, 4.70.
6. 'Meditate, O my mind, on the Lord Hari, The Stainless One, Pure Spirit through and through. Ever more beauteous in fresh-blossoming love That shames the splendour of a million moons, Like lightning gleams the glory of His form, Raising erect the hair for very joy.'
7. Nirmal Kumar Roy, *Dakshineswar Kali Mandirer Itivritta* (Dakshineswar: Lokmata Rani Rasmani Foundation, 2005), 59.
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# REVIEWS

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Chennai 600 004. 2009. E-mail:  
srkmath@vsnl.com. x+310 pp. Rs 150.

Swami Yatiswarananda is a familiar name to readers of literature on meditation. *Meditation and Spiritual Life*, a voluminous compendium of his talks to diverse audiences, has long been considered one of the best and most comprehensive books on the subject. A monastic disciple of Swami Brahmananda, Swami Yatiswarananda had guided spiritual aspirants for about five decades, both in India and abroad. The present book is a collection of the notes of some of his lectures, which were published in thirty instalments in the *Vedanta Kesari*, an English journal of the Ramakrishna Order.

The book has been divided into two parts. The first contains sixteen chapters relating to control of the mind, continence, meditation, and the three yogas—karma, bhakti, and jnana—and lessons from the lives of great men. The second part contains four chapters on *Drig Drishya Viveka* and Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, apart from teachings and answers to questions on spiritual practice.

Establishing the importance of spiritual life and explaining the beginning of religion, the author proceeds to delineate the path of spiritual practice. The hypocritical tendencies of the mind are critically examined and values for spiritual life laid out. After stressing the importance of brahmacharya in spiritual life, we are taught the essential features of karma, bhakti, and jnana yoga. The chapters on continence and the unreality of the world are based on the author's lectures on *Vedanta-sara*. Similarly, the chapters on divine company and sublimation of instinctual tendencies are based on his talks on *Narada Bhakti Sutra*. The notes on *Drig Drishya Viveka* are striking and could well become a separate book.

Spiritual life should not lead to disharmony with others. The joy arising within, out of spiritual progress, should percolate into our everyday activ-

ities and spread amongst our fellow beings. Contrary to the ordinary belief that spiritual aspirants are misfits in the world, the author exhorts us to live a life of harmony and breadth with love for others, basing our dealings on the inherent divinity of humanity.

The section on spiritual practice contains pointed questions on various practical aspects of japa and meditation and clear replies. The book has a befitting ending with the immortal lines of Swami Vivekananda's poem 'To a Friend': 'Who loves all beings, without distinction / He indeed is worshipping best his God.'

Just as the butterfly, shown on the cover of the book, goes about collecting honey from various flowers, the editor has done an excellent job of culling valuable words of wisdom spoken at different times and arranging them in a meaningful and elegant manner. The author brings in citations from various scriptures as well as from Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature, and also adds incidents and anecdotes from the lives of great men, including his guru Swami Brahmananda. Printed on quality paper and nicely bound, this book could prove to be a valuable companion to seekers of God.

Swami Narasimhananda  
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## **Archaeology in India: Individuals, Ideas and Institutions**

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54 Rani Jhansi Road, New Delhi 110 055.  
2009. E-mail: [mrml@mrmlbooks.com](mailto:mrml@mrmlbooks.com).  
xx + 396 pp. Rs 1,495.

The volume is an avowed attempt to look at individual and institutional initiatives, at processes rather than events, and to provide a multilinear rather than linear discourse, outside the official history of Indian archaeology. Three of the essays under the section 'Individuals' provide valuable insights into



the works of people not much connected with the Archaeological Survey of India, like Colin Mackenzie, retired surveyor general of India, Valentine Ball of the Geological Survey of India, and Robert Bruce Foote, a pioneer in prehistoric research in India. They connected prehistoric mining and tool sequence, Neolithic ash mounds, megalithic stone circles, and iron age settlements with ethnology and science, and also laid the foundations of experimental archaeology during British days. There is an analysis of the work done on regional archaeology by Indian scholars like R P Chanda, R D Banerji, Yazdani—under the princely patronage of the Gaekwads of Baroda—the Bhanjas of Mayurbhanj, and the Nizam of Hyderabad. The regional reorientation shifted attention from the eastern coastal plains of Orissa, dominated by Hindu monuments, to the marginalized tribal culture of northern Orissa hills. The pioneering work done by research institutions like the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Kolkata, the Varendra Research Institute, Rajshahi, Kolkata University Museum, and the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti, Guwahati, on regional identities has also been highlighted. An illustration of the pioneering nature of their work is provided by their attempt at identifying places like Karna-suvarna, capital of Shashanka, Raktamrittika Vihara, and a riverine route through the Ajay River used by medieval Bengali traders.

In British days epigraphic and numismatic evidence was used to trace trade routes, chronology, and the area of Indo-Greek rule in North-west India, the Maitraka rule in Gujarat, the linguistic link of North-east India with South East Asia, and the Indo-Roman trade contacts. References in Sangam literature, Sthala Puranas, and medieval dramatic texts have helped in identifying megalithic burial traditions, settlements, and cultural formation processes. Accounts of Chinese pilgrims have been used to contextualize cultural sites.

The volume suggests that in post-colonial India, Indian scholars and institutions came into their own. Conservation came out of the ambit of the Public Works Department. Non-local ceramic material was taken into account to give an idea of the Indian Ocean trade from port cities and interior settlements other than Arikamedu. Architectural study moved out of an exclusive focus on structure or style to analyse patronage, meaning, socio-economic background, and classification in the light of technical treatises. Regional study was enlarged with the proliferation of universities, state archaeological departments, research societies, and museums. The use of

natural sciences and ethnography was expanded to associate stratigraphy with specific cultures.

Despite the signal service rendered by this volume in exploring the role of diverse players in the archaeological field and in breaking out of the traditional monolithic approach, the claim to provide a multilinear narrative of the processes remains only partially fulfilled. The descriptive accounts of the disparate roles of individuals and institutions provide no intellectual history of the process of using objects, tools, and techniques as extrasomatic means of adaptation by human organisms to changing environment. The section on ideas is confined to a factual history of research on ceramic typology and techniques, and does not graduate into analytical historiography. The interesting and informative sallies, strewn through the text, about the contours and quirks of interpersonal and inter-institutional relations, remain to be enlarged to yield a coherent emotional or intellectual history of Indian archaeology. A palimpsestic archaeological record of material culture that not only reflects but also constitutes culture and shapes mental processes remains to be elicited.

The intrusion of non-elite, non-official voices does not correct the taphonomic bias of research, which excludes most of hilly, forest, and rural India and ignores the ongoing destruction of cultural sites and habitats, vastly accelerated by post-independence developments. The premise that archaeological research has undergone a qualitative change with the engendering of an indigenous consciousness and generation of public archaeology does not seem to be borne out, as archaeological theory and practice appear to have remained hitched to officially established routine. The wider perspectives of trade, comparative, actualistic, and replicative archaeology, interdisciplinary field work, cognitive or environmental archaeology, ethnoarchaeological research, and socio-religious functions of the sites remain to be explored.

Yet, the volume has broken new ground by stating what needs to be stated and by pointing out directions that need to be explored by gathering together the strands that have been unravelled throughout the country, outside the formal structure of public and private institutions, through subaltern and metropolitan efforts. It will remain a pioneering work for researchers on the history of thinking on thinking.

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# REPORTS



## ***Sri Ramakrishna's Birthday at Belur Math***

Sri Ramakrishna's birthday was celebrated at Belur Math on 16 February 2010. Cooked prasad was served to about 38,000 devotees. Revered Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, presided over the public meeting held in the afternoon. The public celebration held on Sunday, 21 February, drew more than one lakh of visitors who thronged the Math throughout the day. Cooked prasad was served to about 38,000 persons on that occasion.

## ***News from Branch Centres***

The **Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata**, organized an international seminar on 'Spirituality and Science of Consciousness' from 8 to 10 January 2010. Swami Prabhananda, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, spoke at the inaugural session. In all, 17 eminent scholars from India and abroad presented papers.

**Ramakrishna Mission, Viveknagar**, organized an all-Tripura devotees' conference at the ashrama on 10 January, which was attended by more than 500 devotees.

Monks of **Ramakrishna Math, Ulsoor**, visited the inmates of Bengaluru's central prison on Makara Sankranti, 14 January, as part of the ashrama's social welfare activities. Bhajans, a meditation class, and a lecture by a monk were held on the occasion. Saris were distributed to 120 women inmates. The ashrama has been authorized to have monthly *satsanga* with the prison's inmates, especially with youths.

The college at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur**, celebrated the inaugural phase of its golden jubilee from 12 to 15 January.

*Monks of  
Ramakrishna  
Math, Ulsoor, at  
the central prison,  
Bengaluru*



On 17 January, the birthday of Swami Brahmananda, Revered Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, consecrated the Sri Ramakrishna temple, with a marble image, at **Ramakrishna Math, Allahabad**, which was remodelled on the occasion of the ashrama's centenary. Revered Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj also addressed a public meeting and released a commemorative volume. In all, about 120 monastics and several hundred devotees attended the function.

On 22 and 23 January **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh**, conducted a child dental care project in which 670 children of a primary school were examined and treated. Besides, the centre continued with its child eye care programme in which 2,512 school children from a poor locality of the city underwent eye check-up. Of these, 272 children with refractory errors were given free glasses.

Sri Shekhar Dutt, governor of Chhattisgarh, inaugurated the physiotherapy unit of the hospital at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narainpur**, on 11 February.

Smt. Sheila Dikshit, chief minister of Delhi, declared open the new medical block at the Karol Bagh campus of **Ramakrishna Mission, New Delhi**, on 16 February.

Revered Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj inaugurated the newly built monks' quarters at

**Ramakrishna Math, Chandipur**, on 23 February.

The Sanskrit college at **Ramakrishna Math, Palai**, celebrated its silver jubilee on 27 and 28 February.

### Achievements

Sri Sanat Halder, a staff member of **Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Deoghar**, won the silver medal in the 34th National Yoga Championship in the age group 21–25 (men) organized from 4 to 7 February at Yamunanagar, Haryana, by the Yoga Federation of India, an alliance recognized by the Indian Olympic Association.

Twenty students—seven from class 10 and thirteen from class 12—of the school at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narainpur**, won the 'Mukhyamantri Jnana Protsahan Puraskar' for their excellent performance in the state board examinations 2008–09. The award also included Rs 10,000 for each of them.

**Ramakrishna Math, Chennai**, has introduced an award called Vivekananda Vidya Prashasti to be presented to persons contributing in various fields such as education, music and arts, service, and sports and allied sectors, on the lines of Swami Vivekananda's teachings. The first Vivekananda Vidya Prashasti was presented to Sri Atmakur Ramanaiah, programme officer of the ashrama's publication department, for his doctoral thesis in Telugu on 'Swami Vivekananda's Humanism'. The award—comprising a citation, a statuette of Swamiji, a shawl, and Rs 50,000—was presented to him during the public celebration of Sri Ramakrishna birthday at the ashrama on 21 February.

Kumar Somlang Tesia, a class-9 student of the

school at **Ramakrishna Mission, Narottam Nagar**, who hails from the Tusta tribe of the Tirap district, was selected for the prestigious National Talent Search Award for the year

2009, granted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training. The award comprises a certificate and Rs 6,000.

### Relief

**Cyclone Aila Relief** • Centres in West Bengal continued relief operations among the victims of the Aila Cyclone. Details of the relief materials distributed are as follows. **Baranagar Mission**: 250 saris, 250 dhotis, 200 lungis, 46 chadars, and 250 blankets to 500 families in Sandeshkhali II block, North 24-Parganas district, on 3 and 4 February. **Belgharia**: 3,766 mosquito nets to 3,739 families in Gosaba block, South 24-Parganas district, on 17 January. **Swami Vivekananda's Ancestral House**: 400 blankets to cyclone victims of 5 villages at Sandeshkhali I block in North 24-Parganas district, from 12 to 23 January.

**Flood Relief** • From 20 to 23 February **Hyderabad** centre distributed 133 looms to needy weavers who had lost their looms in a recent flood at Rajoli village in Mehaboobnagar district.

**Distress Relief** • The following centres distributed various items to the needy: **Baghbazar**: assorted garments to 444 children, and textbooks, school uniforms, and other items to 40 students; **Gol Park**: 50 kg rice; **Taki**: 1,178 saris and 95 lungis; **Jalpaiguri**: 400 saris and 80 children's garments.

**Winter Relief** • 2,561 blankets were distributed to needy people affected by the severity of winter through the following centres: **Belgaum**: 200; **Gol Park**: 650; **Kankurgachhi**: 200; **Muzaffarpur**: 400; **Ooty**: 300; **Taki**: 811. Besides, **Baghbazar Math** distributed 123 chadars and 123 sweaters.

PB

### Blanket distribution

